Mirror Image

THE MEDIA AND THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

VIMAL BALASUBRAHMANYAN

A CED PUBLICATION

MIRROR IMAGE

The Media and the Women's Question

Vimal Balasubrahmanyan

CENTRE FOR EDUCATION & DOCUMENTATION
Bombay
1988

© Centre for Education & Documentation, 1988

Published by:

Centre for Education & Documentation
3, Suleman Chambers
4, Battery Street
Bombay 400 039, India

Cover Designed by:

S. Muralidharan

Typeset by:

Verba Network Services
139, 8th Main Road, 12th Cross
Malleswaram
Bangalore 560 003

Printed by:

Verba Network Services
at Mudrika Offset Printers
16, 5th Cross, Sudhamanagar
Bangalore 560 027

CONTENTS

Foreword vii

I. LIGHT AND SHADE
Reflections from Media Sociology 1

II. VIRTUAL IMAGE
Visibility of the Women's Question in the Media 7

III. LATERAL INVERSION
How the Media Subverts the Women's Question 17

Double-Think
Dual Images of Women 17

Blind Spot
Overlooking the Women's Perspective 23

Through the Looking Glass
How the Media Twists the Picture 30

Ugly Sisters
The Media's Hostility to Feminism 37

It's One Big Joke
Trivialising the Women's Question 44

Greer is Good Copy
How News Values Operate 51

IV. FACE TO FACE
Interactions between the Media and the Movement 55

Blow Hot, Blow Cold
Mixed Experiences of Activist Groups with the Media 55

The Watchdogs
Women Monitor the Media 64

What's the Noise About?
How the Establishment Responds to Criticism 70

Inside Stories
Media Women's Efforts within the System 78

Alter Egos
Tension between Media Women and Activists 87

Unmet Needs
Feminist Media and the Movement 90

V. THE AUDIENCE STRIKES BACK
Views from the Receiving End 97

Over One's Head
Polemics and Jargon in Feminist Writings 97

Deflected Messages
Audience Responses to Media Content 101

A Look Inwards
Feminists on Feminist Media & Messages 108

VI. THE GREAT SPIN-OFF
When the Media Rides the Feminist Wave 117

Soft Sell
The Case for Women's Magazines & Pages 118

The Unseeing Eye
Doordarshan Takes up the Women's Cause 130

Liberation Sells
The Theme that launched the Gadget and other Ads 138

VII. WITH A VIEW TO CHANGE
From Inside and Outside 145

Afterword 153

Bibliography 157

FOREWORD

No, this is not one more study on sexism in the media. Plenty of research has already been done to demonstrate that the media is sexist and today we can take this as an acknowledged fact which need not be proved all over again. However, the issue of women and the media has developed certain new dimensions in the wake of the activities of the women's movement and also because of the media's own response to the mood created by the Women's Decade. This book is an effort at examining these emerging features of the mass media in relation to the women's question.

It is hoped that this study will be of use and interest to women's groups, people working in the media professions, students and teachers in university journalism departments, and women and men who are at the receiving end of the media's messages. The study concentrates mainly on the English language print-media — newspapers and mass circulation magazines — from the early 1980s to around September 1987, with a brief look at television and just a glance at cinema and at advertising.

The first section presents a collection of insights, culled from findings in media sociology, which provide a basis and a framework for examining the media's treatment of the women's question. The six sections which follow cover: the legitimation of the women's question in the media in recent years; the media's distortion of this issue; interactions between media and the movement; audience responses to feminist messages; how the media cashes in on the women's question; and finally, some suggestions for initiating change and tackling the media's sexism and distortion of the women's question. A large number of boxes compiled from a variety of sources have been included to make this book as informative and useful as possible.

This book could not have been written without the warm and helpful responses of many people to my requests for information and comments and I gratefully acknowledge their assistance.

Special thanks to Nalini Bhanot of Saheli, Tanushree of Chingari, Maitreyi Chatterjee of Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha and Renana Jhabvala of SEWA for their detailed accounts of the experiences of their respective groups with the media. Special thanks also to all the women in the media who shared their thoughts on the subject of initiating changes while working within the system, and their experiences in trying to influence media content: since some of them do not wish to be identified I am naming none.

I am deeply grateful to all those who responded to my questionnaire on what they feel about feminist writings, those who wrote me detailed letters supplying information on specific points, and sent me cuttings, reports, visuals and other materials relevant to this study. For making available from his office a regular supply of a variety of national newspapers and magazines, thanks also to my husband, K. Balasubrahmanyan, without whose help I could not have attempted a fairly detailed study of the print media. To Mr. R. Krishnamurthy, thanks for his excellent typing of the manuscript.

And finally, a very special thank you to my friends in CED for their encouragement and support and for making this book a reality.

Secunderabad
December 1988

Vimal Balasubrahmanyan

P.S. Gouri Dange has sub-edited this book. Thanks.

— C.E.D.

I

LIGHT AND SHADE
Reflections from Media Sociology

In looking at the subject of the media and the women's question, some findings from media sociology offer a helpful framework. For example, media studies have shown that:

** The values of media people determine the content and the "slant" of media output.

** Media content gives a partial view of reality. Its stereotyped depiction of anti-establishment groups and individuals in turn influences the attitudes of audiences to these groups and their movements.

** The mass media tends to preserve the status quo rather than stimulate social change.

** Audiences are selective in their consumption of media output, generally accepting messages which reinforce their beliefs and rejecting or ignoring those propagating contrary values.

** "Perceived" meanings of media messages may often be very different from the *intended* meanings.

** Anti-establishment groups are aware that they must consciously *use* the media so that their viewpoint too gets adequate representation.

These are just a few facts thrown up by media studies, relevant to the women's question, as will be illustrated in later chapters.

The need to start from sociological concepts is threefold: One, it helps us understand that the characteristics exhibited by the mass media on the women's

question are similar to those displayed in the context of other disadvantaged groups and social movements. It would, therefore, be misleading to look at the media's distortion of the women's question as some sort of conspiracy against women alone.[1]

Two, it reminds us of the limitations of the mass media as a tool for social change. The mass media can only be one of several simultaneous strategies to be used for creating awareness and spreading consciousness. However, though the mass media tends to *follow* changes in opinion and rarely initiates such changes, it does become a useful tool at a stage when the activities of the movement have established their legitimacy.

And three, understanding media sociology can help us not only use the media more effectively but also recognise our own shortcomings in projecting the aims of the movement — for example in the area of communicating with the non-converted.

Below are some pointers culled from a wide range of writings on the sociology of the media and communication in general. They are stated here without elaboration and without citing parallels from the women's question. They are also relevant to the women's question, the highlighting of which will be taken up in the chapters to come.

The "Communicators"

** The picture of the social world which the media presents is a partial one — it is not only incomplete but it also presents social reality from particular, and different, political vantage points.

The media has often been described as a "mirror held up to society". If at all the mirror analogy is to be used, then the media must be seen as a hall of mirrors — each medium reflecting social reality from different perspectives. This is as true of the left-wing press as of the right or centre, as true of the minority press as of the majority press.[2]

** The media acts as "agenda setter" by bringing up subjects for discussion. The subjects that the media chooses to report are selected largely through force of habit and a "mutual reinforcement process". Stories from a particular source, no matter how routine, are almost sure to be published. Custom and habit get ingrained and as new areas of society develop, they have to fight to get their story told in public simply because it has never become a habit to send reporters to cover their activities.[3]

** The personal values and social background of media people affect selection of content and interpretation of the needs and interests of the audience. Members of the media professions tend to subscribe to dominant political and social values. Thus, the mass communication process is more likely to sustain rather than challenge the existing power structures in society.[4]

Media Content

** "Folk devils" is the phrase coined for the media's depiction of "outsiders" whose behaviour threatens dominant social norms. By the devices of exaggeration and stereotyping, by wrenching such behaviour from any societal context that might help to explain it, and portraying it as a manifestation of the irrational, these groups are depicted as being a threat to the social order. Such presentation of "deviant behaviour" reflects the use of "ideological filters" by media professionals.[5]

** Media's images of "deviant behaviour" may result in ill-informed public attitudes, social policies, perhaps even legislation.[6]

** The placement of news on an important or subsidiary page, the length, heading, choice of language are familiar devices for inserting a political or emotional interpretation of news into its actual reporting, powerfully suggesting a specific response to the news.[7]

** "We expect to find editorialising in the features of a newspaper, and are prepared for it, but inevitably some degree of editorial influence also creeps into straightforward news columns." What a paper leaves out is as significant as what it puts in. Headlines are important as a first introduction to a news item. Every newspaper, when it reaches the reader, is the result of a whole series of selection as to what items shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy etc.[8]

** The media marks particular people and events as more significant simply by reporting them. For, "what is noted is by definition notable."[9]

The Audience

** "People tend to select the parts of an argument they agree with, ignoring parts they object to, or putting them down as lies. They also tend to select newspapers whose opinions conform with their own views. The mass media thus help to reinforce whatever opinion readers or listeners already hold."[10]

** One of the effects of the mass media on audience is termed "narcotising dysfunction."

"Exposure to a flood of information may serve to narcotise rather than energise the average reader or listener. As an increasing amount of time is devoted to reading and listening, a decreasing share is available for organised action. The individual reads accounts of issues and problems, and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualised, rather remote connection with organised social action is not activated."[11]

** The mass media has also been used to try and promote socially desirable attitudes. Generally it is found that "monopolisation" is a necessary condition for achieving this goal. That is, if a set of progressive values and images are presented by the media, they will have the effect of persuading only if contrary images and values are *not* also presented. To the extent that opposing sets of values are simultaneously offered, the net effect is negligible.[12] (This is found also when the media, in order to be objective, gives both sides of a question,

to allow audiences to "decide for themselves". The resultant ambiguity and the audience response or "selective perception" reinforces rather than changes prevailing beliefs.)[13]

On "Using" the Media

In the West, media studies have examined the negative way in which the media has depicted trade unions, ethnic minorities, blacks, working class youth etc, by stereotyping them and presenting them as "problems" (like "the immigrant problem") or labelling their behaviour as anti-social and irrational. News values operate in such a way that such groups "make news" only when they resort to negative or destructive behaviour.[14]

However, organised radical groups now realise that such media depiction can be countered only by active initiatives from their side; that organisations accustomed to media hostility must begin to *use* mass media more strategically, towards getting adequate and positive coverage.[15] In addition, radical groups have also responded by creating their own parallel media.

"Alternative journalism, an independent but contemporary development, grew from a dissatisfaction with the viewpoint and subject matter of the traditional media. The alternative journals point out flaws in society that the press, through long acceptance, has tended to disregard. These journals are distinguished primarily by their more radical approach. Aimed at the minorities, the poor and the young, the alternative press found it collected a readership among middle class intellectuals."[16]

Putting the media to use

"The advent of new communications technique and patterns, particularly television, may have proven to have had precisely the contrary effect of that suggested by some of the classical views of the 'increasing massification of society'. Namely, the rise of militant and active minority movements — the poor, blacks, students, civic action groups — who, because they found themselves, as it were, ready for it, discovered in the constant search by the mass media for newsworthy material a platform that they had hitherto lacked for the expression of their grievances.

"Despite the important negative aspects of the mass media in so far as they are the tools of commercial interest or political manipulations... democrats, consumers' associations, defenders of the ecological balance, pacifists, militants in the civil rights movements, have made wide and frequently successful uses of them for their respective causes in more open societies."

— From *Mass Society*
by Salvador Giner, 1976

It is suggested that access to media occupations will help change media depiction of groups who have been portrayed in a negative or distorted way. However, this is not so simply or easily achieved.

"Research is needed to determine whether or not ethnic or other minority group status makes an individual a more effective communicator about minority affairs. Research is also needed to determine the extent to which a member of a minority group would be able, once employed in the media, to control significantly the content that the organisation produces."[17]

Media and Society

Sociologists suggest that there is a "reciprocal" relationship between media and society — a two-way process by which media content influences society and society influences the media.[18] It is also suggested that the process is "circular" and therefore it is not always possible to separate cause from effect.[19]

Perhaps this explains why the media, while frequently distorting the feminist viewpoint, also seeks to cash in on it, sensing that the new feminist ideas do evoke a good reader response and that, being a vehicle for progressive ideas, enhance the media's own image and the image of its controllers.

Thus, with the help of media sociology, in subsequent chapters we will look at the the media's coverage of women's issues in response to the activism of the Decade, as contrasted with its earlier neglect on the same issues; the media's distortion and subversion of the women's question as embodied in its hostility to feminism; the nature of the media's interaction with the movement and the movements' own efforts to use the media; the unpredictability of audience response to media content and its apathy to exposures of injustice and atrocities; and, and bandwagon phenomenon of the media riding the feminist wave.

References and Notes

1. As one progressive journalist writing on a variety of issues, including women, remarks, media's attitude to the women's question is part of an ad hocism which characterises its attitude to *all* issues, whether it is environment, or drought, or atrocities by landlords against bonded labour.
2. *Media and Society*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.
3. *Mass Communication and Human Interaction* by Robert Murphy, 1977.
4. *Communication* by Denis Mcquail (*Aspects of Modern Sociology* series) 1984 edition.
5. *Media and Society*, Op. cit.2.
6. *The Audience*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.
7. *Communications* by Raymond Williams, 1976.
8. *Mass Communication* by Alan Hancock, 1970.
9. Quoted in *Teaching the Media* by Len Masterman, 1985.
10. *An Introduction to Mass Communication: Problems in Press and Broadcasting* by Martin D. Carter, 1971.

11. & 12.

'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action' by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in *Mass Communications*, edited by Wilbur Schramm, 1960.

13. *The Media in Britain* by Jeremy Tunstall, 1983.

14. *The Power of the Media*, Milton Keynes Open University Course in Social Sciences, 1977.

15. Len Masterton, Op. cit. 9.

16. Robert Murphy, Op. cit. 3.

17. *Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective* by Charles A. Wright, 1975.

18. *The Power of the Media*, Op. cit. 14.

19. Robert Murphy, Op. cit. 3.

II

VIRTUAL IMAGE
Visibility of the Women's Question in the Media

Equality before law

Power and visibility of women

Pak Feminists Fight for Equal Rights

Laws don't deter crime against women

Diverse nature of feminism

None of these are headings from any feminist journal or women's magazine. Nor are they from the women's pages of the daily newspapers.

The first is a front-page report in the Delhi *Statesman* on the landmark Saira Banu (alias Subanu) case judgement. The second is a review of six feminist books in the *Hindustan Times* literary page. The third is an edit page article in the *Free Press Journal*. The fourth is a front-page 'news analysis' feature in the Delhi *Times of India*. And the fifth is a top article on the edit page of the *Hindu* around the time of the UN conference in Nairobi, to mark the end of the Women's Decade in 1985.

Women's issues are not invisible anymore in the general mass media. Nobody would describe the *Hindu* as a feminist or radical paper, yet the Sunday magazine section on July 12, 1987, actually had five separate items on topics pertaining to women. Nobody would describe the *Telegraph* either as feminist or radical, but this is the paper which published on its edit page, *Manushi* editor Madhu Kishwar's perceptive analysis of the Shah Bano issue, reproducing in two or three parts from the original article in her feminist journal.

The fact that serious discussions with a feminist perspective on a range of issues (and not just the so-called women's issues) appear regularly in progressive left-wing journals and papers is not surprising. For, progressive movements, their struggles for social change, and the questions they raise on oppression and exploitation inevitably get coverage in the anti-establishment media.

What is noteworthy about the women's question is its high visibility today in the establishment media. Where it exists side-by-side with the old sexist images — the stereotypes, the back-page pin-ups and centrespreads.

The Media Mix

Women's issues are today as much a part of the "media-mix" as, say, bonded labour, the environment and exploitation of tribals. Papers like the *Telegraph*, *Deccan Chronicle* and the *Statesman* all have a weekly women's page. The Hyderabad edition of *Indian Express* had a weekly page on women until around August 1987 but since then the page has been dropped and a column, 'Women's Voice', started in its Saturday 'Weekend' feature.

Other papers which, at the time of writing, have a regular women's column are the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* ('Gender Theme') and the *Deccan Herald* ('On Women, For Women'). The Delhi *Statesman* had a weekly 'Women's World' feature until around September 1987, written by a staffer. After she left, the paper has replaced it with a weekly slot for an article on women's issues.

Women's columns in some papers are written by one regular contributor while others have a variety of contributors. Though not all such columns have a radical perspective, and though the women's pages still have a beauty-cookery formula, a certain amount of feminist writing too gets included in most of these pages and columns.

New glossies have made their appearance in the women's magazine category, like *Flair* and *Savvy*. Neither the old nor the new women's magazines have abandoned the traditional formula features but both types also publish articles with a feminist perspective and give coverage to the activities of women's groups. Besides this, all the mass circulation current affairs magazines publish serious topical reports on women's issues.

Legitimation of the Women's Question

The women's question gained legitimation in the general establishment media rather tentatively during the early years of the Decade but very substantially by its close in 1985. A major reason has been the high *audibility* of women's issues,

particularly during the latter half of the Decade, with the validity of these issues getting acknowledged in national and international forums. Governments and UN agencies announce schemes for women, and policies in areas like health, education and employment. Social science reports analysing women's conditions get published. Activist women's groups stage protests and launch campaigns. All these make news, and get reported in the news columns, commented upon in editorials and analysed in feature articles.

The Progressive Journals

Newsletters and magazines brought out by progressive activist groups have been meaningfully highlighting the women's dimension in a variety of radical causes. For example, in the field of health, the *medico friend circle bulletin*, the Voluntary Health Association of India's journal, *Health for the Millions*, and the *Radical Journal of Health* have all brought out issues on the topic of women and health with articles by feminist writers. Journals like *Social Scientist* and *Lokayan Bulletin* have published special issues focusing on the women's movement.

In addition, a number of feminist newsletters in English and the regional languages have come into existence, published by activist groups and mainly reaching activist circles. Two women's studies centres, Research Centre for Women's Studies at the SNDT University of Bombay and the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi bring out newsletters. The latter also publishes an annual journal, *Samya Shakti*, each issue being devoted to a central theme.

Manushi, a bi-monthly English language feminist journal published from New Delhi is the only major magazine of its kind with a national readership.

A radical journal like *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) periodically brings out a *Review of Women's Studies* in addition to frequent articles and editorials on topical women's issues. The left-wing *Mainstream* has a 'Women's World' section which used to be fairly regular but has become sporadic of late, mainly because, I suspect, of a shortage of appropriate contributions. These two journals reach a larger readership than the radical, progressive movement journals mentioned earlier, and are also read in influential academic and administrative circles.

The Left Media and the Women's Movement

The language and perspective of writings on women's issues in left-wing journals are similar to those in the feminist media, and are very often written by feminist writers active in the movement. These writings are obviously far more radical than the kind which appear in the establishment media. Journals like *Mainstream* and *EPW* have consistently been used as forums for highlighting the questions raised by the movement in the major recent campaigns — for the amendment of the rape law, and the campaigns against female foeticide and injectable contraceptives — as well as to focus on a range of issues like sexism and violence against women.

A left-wing newspaper like *Patriot* has shown a strong commitment to the women's question. It has prominently displayed articles on feminist issues on the

edit page, published editorials taking a strong stand on various topical issues, and has frequently carried full-page lead features on women's issues in the Sunday magazine section. *Patriot* used to have a fine women's page, refreshingly different from women's pages in the establishment media, but for some reason it discontinued it in 1984 when the paper switched over to phototypesetting. But it still continues to give positive coverage to radical issues and events.

All the above are examples of left-oriented media which are supportive of the left political parties but are independent and do not act as their official organs. On the other hand, the attitude of the *orthodox* political left and its media appears to be ambivalent. Unfortunately, this study could not be extended to the official media organs of the left parties, but the experience of one feminist activist, who has links with some left political groups, suggests that this is an area deserving study.

This activist says that her feminist outlook (she is also associated with autonomous women's groups) has been a source of tension between her and and the orthodox left.[1] Some of her writings and activities have been criticised in official party organs. It is well-known that the orthodox left has misgivings about feminist ideology, but the fact remains that the women's wings of left parties have taken the same kind of stand on a number of issues as the autonomous women's groups have done. It is an uneasy relationship, and a study of how the orthodox left media projects the women's movement should prove to be interesting.

Fight against dowry, exploitation, their main task

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF INDIAN WOMEN

Economic independence, welfare measures, need of the hour

What has been achieved during Women's Decade?

Coverage of Women's Issues in Progressive Paper

Elevating the Women's Question

One may mention here that progressive left-oriented journals in the West, like *New Statesman*, *New Society* and *New Internationalist* in the UK and *Mother Jones* and *Nation* in the US, have all regularly given prominence to feminist issues. Such writings have been integrated into the news, comment and features pages instead of being marginalised into women's pages or columns. This has helped to *elevate* the women's question to the same level of importance as other current affairs topics and political commentaries. Interestingly, while most such writing is still done by activist women and feminist writers, writings with a sympathetic perspective on women have also come from male writers.

In India, while the movement has support from many (but not all) progressive males, and while a number of media men do subscribe to the aims of the movement, by and large radical writings on women's issues have been mainly from women. There may be reportage, editorials, TV or book reviews and an occasional academic piece from male writers, but rarely ever any detailed analytical writing, sympathetically examining the women's question.

In this context, the point made by Madhu Jain, who was the 1987 *Eve's Weekly* Woman Journalist of the Year award winner, is relevant.[2] Acknowledging that it is important to encourage women writing on women's issues, she suggests that the time should come when such awards are thrown open to men too — so that more such issues get written about in the general magazines and are given the same importance as writings on political issues.

Regional Language Media

Information from activists in different parts of the country suggests that the regional press has mostly remained conservative, tradition-bound and hostile to feminist ideas.[3] In her analysis of women writers of Tamil fiction, C.S.Lakshmi has shown that most of them uphold conventional social norms in their writings.[4] The few who have departed from the traditional have never done so radically. She comments that all the writers in her study cater to the big market in Tamil magazines which more or less perpetuates the same values about women as the commercial Tamil cinema.

As for non-fiction, a friend who reads Tamil magazines tells me that a few serious articles on topical women's issues have begun to appear in the serious, small-circulation Tamil journals. However, when even mildly feminist ideas are expressed in the mass-circulation magazines, there is usually an onslaught of adverse male opinion attacking such writers. This is a comment based only on a brief reading of a variety of Tamil magazines during 1986-87, and the issue clearly deserves more exhaustive study.

Altogether, not much information was available on the regional language media for this study. (A short piece by Vibhuti Patel in *Countermedia*, No.4, 1987 describes conservatism in the Gujarati press.) The dominant images of women in different regional media, the attitude of this media to the movement, and the experiences of progressive writers in getting feminist writings published — all these are areas which need to be researched.

"Women's Dimension"

Coming back to the general English language media on which this study has concentrated, one immediately notices the lack of perspective characterising this media's focus on women's issues. This will be dealt with in detail in the next section but it would be relevant to mention here that the establishment media has sometimes missed the point badly.

To give an example, between 1984 and 1986, *Science Today* had a monthly feature on 'Women and Science' but none of these articles threw any light on any real *feminist* aspect of science or science policy. Instead, articles in this feature were on topics like: cooking gas, health and nutrition, perfumes, rangoli, how to make cut flowers last longer and the healing qualities of haldi. They deviated only slightly from the traditional beauty-cookery-house-making formula and were at the most dressed up to provide a little technical information.

The women's cause would have been far better served if *Science Today* had confined itself to its serious science and technology articles and had not felt compelled to pay lip-service to the mood of the Decade.

As absurd as the *Science Today* approach was a recent 'Weekend' feature in the Hyderabad *Indian Express* (August 15, 1987) in which "women's reactions to the VP wave" were put together in an article on V.P.Singh's visit to the city soon after he fell out with Rajiv Gandhi. It was, of course, not surprising to come across such an irrelevant and superficial approach, because women's page articles in this paper have often been simply "by women" or "on women" regardless of whether there is any special women's dimension to the topic or event discussed.

Impact of the Decade

On the positive side, the climate of thinking generated by the Decade has indeed helped to improve, though not fully transform, the perspective of some

"Of interest for women"

In October 1980, *Indian Express* (Hyderabad) started a weekly women's page and printed the following announcement:

"We invite our women readers to write about their problems and experiences in the various professions they are in and about their life at home. Questions will be answered in these columns by a doctor, beautician and cookery expert."

A repeat notice in July 1982 inviting contributions for the page said:

"Articles bearing on subjects of interest for women viz., house-keeping, careerism (sic), cookery, interior decoration, maternity and child welfare, health education, hobbies, festivals, etc, are invited for publication."

of the mass circulation glossies. Of course they still retain their old sexist images, but their idea of what constitutes a special focus on the women's question is certainly changing.

For example, the *Sunday* issue titled 'How Wronged is the Indian Woman?' (December 22, 1985) is, by that magazine's standards at least, a great leap forward compared to its 1981 Annual on 'The Indian Woman'. The former had articles by activists and academics from the movement even if it also had typical establishment-oriented reports. It was *not* a feminist focus but it did provide space for the expression of a feminist standpoint.

The Annual, on the other hand, was an unabashed "masala" issue, guest-edited by self-confessed MCP Pritish Nandy (as he insists in his editor's note).

It presented a male's eye-view of the Indian woman, with actress Rekha on the cover, some predictable articles inside on Indira Gandhi and Mother Teresa, along with some erotica and typical humour. The editorial note proclaimed that the Indian women "wins" not by "battling for her rights" but by "winning you over".

It is the impact of the Decade which has resulted in many of the national dailies and glossies publishing radical articles by feminist activists. Recent winners of the Media Foundation 'Woman Journalist' award have been radical writers — Madhu Kishwar in 1986 and Kalpana Sharma in 1987. *Eve's Weekly* may still be a traditional women's magazine (which now includes some feminist fare), but winners of the *Eve's Weekly* award since it was started in 1984 have all won it for writings with a feminist viewpoint.

It is the impact of the Decade that a magazine like *Newsweek* prominently included, in its coverage on the Gary Hart controversy, an article with a feminist analysis on the issue of philandering by men running for key administrative posts.[5]

Because of the ideas propagated by the Decade, articles critiquing sexism in the mass media have been published by the same sexist media even if the latter has not felt constrained to change its own sexist policies and images in its columns or in its ads. But some responses have indeed been made to these critiques. There have been some policy statements from the government at least, on positive media portrayal of women, and within the media some women have taken successful initiatives towards changing sexist policies and images.

Women's Lib and all that

Media personality Rami Chhabra recalls, during a panel discussion organised by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, how in 1957, a leading national newspaper refused to give her a job though it published her articles.

"Ten years later, the same newspaper offered me a women's column. And then began another battle, as another editor, equally eminent, frequently found the column too 'serious'. What about fashion, beauty, consumer interests, which is what women's columns should cater to, was a frequent reminder.

"Came 1975 — International Women's Year — and some murmurs down the newspaper grapevine of an exhaustive report on women's status, painstakingly compiled and submitted to the government but not brought into public circulation for it documented the devastating condition of the mass of Indian women even as the nation basked in the glory of a woman Prime Minister. Some of us ferreted out the facts brought to light by this report, thus forcing a larger public debate. writing about these facts became a turning point in my life...

"But talking of 1975 I can't resist sharing with you my encounters with the media as I set out with a UN fellowship to cover the international conference at Mexico city. 'UN Conference on Women?' asked one editor in amazement and disbelief. 'Well, perhaps we could take a short one on its opening.' 'Not its outcome?' 'Well, perhaps a short one on the conclusion.' 'And if there are important developments during its three-week course?' 'Well, maybe a piece or two, but we don't want to be flooded.' I made my own telex arrangements and eventually the newspaper front-paged each despatch on Arab-Israeli confrontation and the North-South arguments, but the final recommendations on the condition of women ran tucked into the magazine section headlined 'Women's Lib and All That.' "

— *Samya Shakti*, 1985

How "Real" is the Media's New Image of Women?

In the past the establishment media has been criticised for: 1) Neglect of women's issues in coverage and comment; 2) Perpetuation of sex-role stereotypes; 3) Sexual exploitation of women's bodies.

The second and third charges are as valid today as they were before the start of the Women's Decade. On the face of it, the first charge doesn't seem to hold water anymore. Indeed, there is a school of thought among readers and media people that what they are getting today is an overdose of women's issues.

And yet, what we find today in media's reflection of the women's question is not the real image but a virtual one.

There is a glaring difference between the establishment media's depiction of women's issues, the women's movement and the women's question as a whole, and the progressive media's depiction of the same. Mass media's present focus on women is important and to be welcomed whenever it serves to inform without distortion. But because it also distorts, or tells a partial tale, or sometimes subverts the question, the images it presents have to be looked at closely and critically.

Certainly there is enhanced coverage today but is this enhanced coverage totally wholesome? Does it give the real picture and the full picture? And is it in tune with the aspirations of the women's movement?

Subsequent sections in this book will try to examine these and other questions flowing from the legitimation of the women's question as seen in the media — aspects which go *beyond* the undoubted sexism in the media. Stereotypes and sexploitation of women, about which much analysis is already available, need not be duplicated here.

References and Notes

1. Personal communication.
2. Interview with Madhu Jain published in *Eve's Weekly*, May 16, 1987.
3. At the December 1985 national conference of activist groups in Bombay, during the workshop on communication it was stated that the Gujarati and Hindi press had generally been hostile to the movement. The Marathi press had been more positive. One reason for this is the frequent contributions to the media by activists. In Tamil Nadu, some activists had initiated the use of translations of good English language articles for the local Tamil media. On the whole there was agreement that the English media had projected a more favourable image of the movement compared with the vernacular media. (FAOW-a, 1985)
4. *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature* by C.S.Lakshmi, Shakti Books, Vikas 1984.
5. 'The Issue was Women' by Suzannah Lessard in *Newsweek* May 18, 1987. This was one of several articles in the cover feature on Gary Hart. The author is described as having earlier, in 1979, written a "controversial" article in *Washington Monthly* on Senator Edward Kennedy and 'Womanising as a political issue'.

III

LATERAL INVERSION
How the Media Subverts the Women's Question

It is said that the media holds up a mirror to society. However, the mirror image is not "real" but is virtual and laterally inverted. The media appears to present reality but in fact its images are only one *version* of reality. The media's treatment of the women's question is an example of this mirror effect.

This section examines how the media, even while giving generous space to women's issues, subverts the women's question. This is done subtlely as well as blatantly, consciously as well as sub-consciously, by: presenting contradictory images; ignoring the women's dimension in some issues; twisting the question by reinforcing conservative values; misrepresenting feminism; reducing serious issues to a joke; distorting the movement through its definition of what is newsworthy and what is not.

The values of media persons determine the way the media treats the women's question and these in turn are the dominant values of society. Through subversion of the women's question, the media demonstrates its trait of opposing social change and maintaining the status quo.

Double-Think
Dual Images of Women

Consider the following examples:

** *Sunday* (April 26, 1987): In Khushwant Singh's 'Gossip Sweet and Sour' column, there is a typical KS comment on women's anatomy. The same issue

has a six-page special report on atrocities against Indian women which includes interviews with activist groups and lawyers.

** *Gentleman* (May 1987): The 'Notebook' column has light-hearted items on Ershad's second wife; Miss India's participation in the Miss Universe contest; 'Love is Bigamous' on actress Jayaprada's marriage to an already-married man, and love-life of "seductive" dancer Leena Das. In the same issue, the 'The Sexes' column has a serious piece by *Femina* editor Vimla Patil, and the 'People' page has a profile of an award winning feminist journalist.

** *India Today* (July 1,1979): The 'Globe Trotting' column has an item on Ursula Andress and Jane Fonda — one fighting a court case against her builder for faulty construction and the other for a seat in the California Arts Council. The heading is 'Women's Lip (sic): Sex Symbols to the Fore'. The illustration is a topless Ursula. Neither the heading nor the picture has any connection with the news reported. This is too familiar and frequent a ploy to rate a comment here. The same issue has a special report on the dowry system — well researched, interview-based, giving details of some cases and the comments of leading activists in the capital.

No Editorial Perspective

The above examples show that despite their coverage on women's issues, the mass circulation glossies have neither overall editorial perspective, nor a committed, ethical stand on the women's question. Like a consumer product, the mass media opts for a "mix" that sells. Where women are concerned, this mix once contained exclusively sexist fare. Now there is an added component — serious reportage on women, because the women's question is "in".

This lack of editorial perspective and the absence of a clearly defined "code" or policy produces results that are laughable to say the least. More examples: The Sunday magazine of the *Indian Express* carries militant feminist features. But the Monday paper's 'City notebook' contains snide items deriding "the libbers". Sympathetic analyses of women's issues in the features page of the *Hindustan Times* and *Times of India* may well be followed by a 'third edit' that is a sarcastic take-off on some aspects of the women's movement. Informative articles on women-and-law appear on the edit page of *Newstime* while sexist cartoons are regular fare in the Sunday magazine section.

A telling example of what may be called "the pantomine-horse syndrome" (where the front and back have no connection with each other) comes from *Sunday*. The June 8, 1986 issue of Sunday had a lengthy lead feature, 'The Unwanted Girl Child', very sympathetic to the feminist perspective, on the campaign in Bombay against misuse of amniocentesis, and the questions raised by women's groups regarding the newer sex-choice technologies.

Barely three months earlier, the March16 issue of the same magazine in its 'Science and Technology' section, had a typical neutral-objective-medical viewpoint piece on the same technologies, written with the air of announcing exciting new advances in science, and without the smallest attempt to place these scientific advancements in a social context. The heading: an exuberant 'It's a Boy!' The

magazine did not publish the Bombay Forum Against Sex Determination and Preselection's letter protesting against the tone of the piece.

"Good Copy"

The dual-image characteristic confirms the impression that these glossies are focusing on the women's question because it provides "good copy", and helps enhance their own image of being "progressive". Since there is no ideological commitment, one issue of a magazine may propagate the feminist theme while the next one may be undisguisedly sexist. Even when focusing on women's issues, much of the reportage is often on-women or by-women stuff with no attempt at a feminist analysis of the topic in question. The *Sunday* cover story, 'Women in Rajiv's Politics', symbolises this approach. The same magazine has featured, in its 'Leisure and Lifestyle' column, interviews with activist women as part of a focus on "changing attitudes".

The combination of feminism, routine accounts about women, and plain sexism is well illustrated in the December 22, 1985 *Sunday*. The theme, marking the end of the UN Decade, is: 'How Wronged is the Indian Woman?'

The front half of the issue has 25 pages of features on the theme, some of the articles being by leading lights in the movement. The 'Sports' section has a routine piece on women players, the 'Business' section another routine one on 'Women in Management' (with stereotyped heading 'Fair deal for fair sex'), a routine piece on women scientists in the 'Science and Technology' section and an analysis of the "boom in feminist literature" in the 'Books' section.

With that *Sunday* says bye bye to the women's question. The subsequent few pages contain the usual cheesecake, curves and cleavages. The last page of this special issue devoted to the women's movement has an ad for Kohinoor condoms, part of a series strongly condemned by women's groups — the copy dehumanises the relationship between the sexes and is almost an incitement to violence.

The Women's Magazines

If the current affairs glossies present double images of sexism and feminism, the commercial women's magazines present the old traditional mix of beauty, cookery and home-making on the one hand and new feminist ideas and coverage on women's groups on the other. All the glossy women's magazines publish sexist ads, but some publish articles critiquing media images of women including their images in advertising. Some, like *Savvy*, adopt a feminist approach to some issues but at the same time also have a regular column by a male writer airing his views on the movement. The blurb introducing this column says that if it "provokes, incites or incenses women, that's probably intentional". The Hyderabad *Indian Express* women's page too has published anti-feminist views by male writers though these have declined somewhat in the last two or three years, reportedly because of screening by women staffers.

Both Sides of the Question

One of the effects of dual images in the general media and in the women's magazines is the reinforcing of attitudes already existing. While these journals do help in creating awareness, this works mainly with already receptive readers. The traditional and the reactionary sections respond more to the sexist and anti-feminist components. In other words, to each his or her own.

For example, *Gentleman* in the 'The Sexes' column had a piece by M.V.Kamath which took the stand that some roles are "unchallengeably female". (June 1987) In a rejoinder to this, Meena Menon (August 1987) writing in the same column presented the feminist viewpoint that gender-roles have nothing to do with biology but are socially conditioned.

The point is this: The general media adopts the policy that all shades of opinion have the right to be aired and this both-sides-of-the-question presentation has the effect of readers opting for the view which coincides with their own. Certainly one can have no quarrel with the policy when impartially carried out. But it does underline the limitations of mass media as an instrument to create changes, particularly in areas where the traditional outlook holds sway.

The Visual Ploy

What *is* offensive, however, is media's apparent espousal of the women's question while simultaneously subverting it. It is common to find critical, analytical articles on sexism and vulgarity in cinema being illustrated with titillating pictures. One is, of course, not surprised when an article in the *Illustrated Weekly* (January 25, 1987) attacking the obscenity of Raj Kapoor's *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* has, as illustration, an obscene cartoon of actress Mandakini.

It happens with the best of them

A good article with the wrong illustration — it can happen even in progressive journals which are staunchly for the women's cause. As the following letter in the *New Statesman* (November 22, 1985) from Lesley Dike (Women's Reproductive Rights Centre, London) shows. It criticises the graphic used to illustrate an article on the controversy in the UK over abortion rights.

"How many *NS* readers did a double take when they looked at the cover on your last issue (Nov.15)? You couldn't blame them for thinking they had picked up pro-life propaganda instead of an intelligent read. The cover graphic looked like it had been lifted straight out of the literature used to whip up anti-abortion hysteria.

"And to accompany such a well thought out, researched article by Julia South with anti-abortion slogans was an insult. We hope that this was careless action rather than deliberate provocation. We welcome coverage for the abortion issue but do expect more sensitive presentation."

The Visual Ploy: Subverting the Women's Question

But a different kind of subversion is also emerging, where the text presents a positive image and the illustration a negative one. For example, the 'Our India' column in the *Illustrated Weekly* (August 9, 1987) had an item on the opening of an all-women police station in Bhopal, with the comment that this could prevent incidents of sexual abuse of women prisoners by male constables and also help deal sensitively with cases of women's oppression. Going off ata tangent, and contradicting the spirit of the item, the cartoon illustrating it shows a large and ugly policewoman wielding a rolling pin, while a harmless looking male cowers nearby with his hands up.

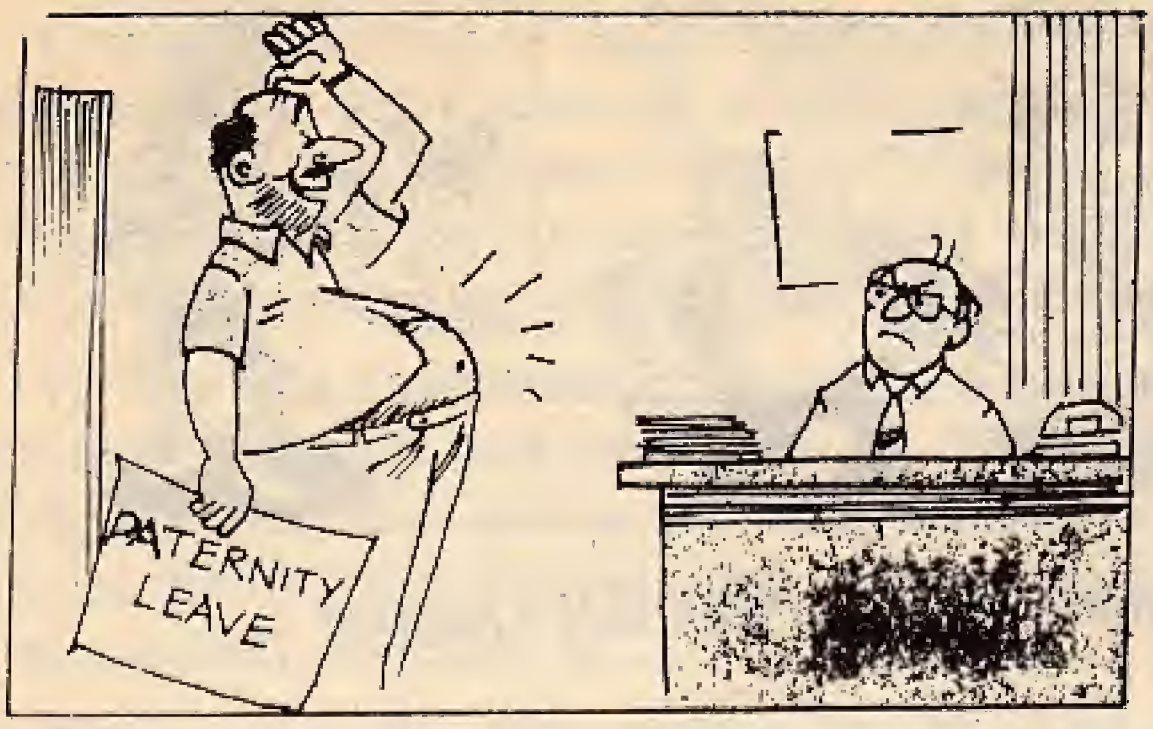
Newstime (August 9, 1987) had a cartoon of a woman using Vat69 as fuel to boil a kettle of water while an angry husband gnashes his teeth in the background. The cartoon is an illustration for an article on a Filipino woman scientist who has invented a new alcohol-based fuel.

Another cartoon in *Newstime* (July 19, 1987) suggests a flirtation between a man and his curvaceous secretary in a revealing dress. The article is a report on a conference of executive-secretaries in London, written with a feminist perspective on the question of upgradation of secretarial skills. Among other things, it condemns the stereotype of the boss-secretary romance.

And finally, there is a cartoon in the *Economic Times* (October 1, 1987) illustrating an article quoting the findings of a research study on 'Husband-wife involvement in buying decisions'. The study found that Indian husbands tend to dominate buying decision, especially of durables, though there is some evidence of a trend towards joint decisions in the buying of convenience goods. Ignoring the findings totally, the cartoon settles for that old and worn-out cliche: a fat, domineering woman striding along a street with "sale" notices on all the shops, her meek husband following her, arms full of parcels and his mouth sealed with sticking plaster.

Tailpiece

Sometimes the sexist element surfaces so unexpectedly, it makes you blink. Like the editorial in *The Daily* (November 11, 1986) welcoming the Bill banning advertising of baby foods. The edit quotes facts on the dangers of bottle-feeding, eulogises the qualities of breastmilk, lists its advantages, and then adds, almost compulsively, that it also "comes in cute containers".



"I MIGHT AS WELL TELL YOU NOW. WHEN I RETIRE I'M GOING HOME TO MOTHER."

"WE HAD A PARROT ONCE. LORETTA TAUGHT IT HOW TO LISTEN."

MANDRAKE

HUNDRED HOWLERS
By Mario Miranda

INKUTTER

She took my autograph and told me that I am her favourite goal-keeper.

SUMFUN
– Vasudevathi

"As I couldn't find the basket I took your helmet to bring the vegetables."

Sexism also rears its head occasionally in papers which, one thought, would surely know better. In the left-wing *Patriot*, with its very positive perspective on the women's question, one found the sexist note sometimes creeping into Mickey Patel's front-page pocket cartoons, in the occasional "middle" type article on the edit page, and once in a while in the Gambols comic strip.

One didn't expect *Patriot* to publish the Punjab government's unethical and sexist family planning ads pushing laproscopy. And though *Patriot* responded to a campaign by the Delhi Media Group in 1983 and stopped publishing ads for porno-graphic Malayalam films, it seems to think nothing of publishing other suggestive and sometimes obscene cinema posters along with its routine cinema ads.

Blind Spot
Overlooking the Women's Perspective

Government, LIC rapped for bias against women

The Bombay High Court has passed strictures against the Union Government and the Life Insurance Corporation for their policies on women while admitting an appeal filed by an LIC Officer. Mrs. R.Vimla Kumari, against her supersession. The judges state that she had a good record of performance and injustice seems to have been done to her by a male-oriented board of directors and male-dominated selection board.

(News item in the Bombay edition of *Times of India*, April12, 1987, an example of an item considered as being of "local" interest, and therefore not published widely by the national press in other cities.)

The high visibility of the women's question in the general media, on closer examination, reveals chinks and cracks. Some issues get reported but many others don't. Some issues get written about without incorporating the women's perspective. And some issues, like the item quoted above, whose larger implications are of interest and relevance to women all over the country, get reported only in the local media, as they are and seen as being of "local importance" only.

Media Staples

Dowry deaths and rape are staples in media reportage on women. One activist whose organisation takes up issues like minimum wages has had reporters telling her that such issues are "not interesting" to write about. ("Why don't you take up cases against dowry and obscene posters?"[1]) Even the dowry/rape staples tend to get sensationalised in a manner which either serves to titillate or desensitise the reader. (An excellent example of "narcotising dysfunction" is public apathy in the face of the flood of reportage on dowry murders and rape.)

Or take the women-and-law topic which attracts instant media attention. Judgements on marriage, divorce and dowry are obvious "news" and are quickly followed by pious editorials. But judgements related to, say, employment, don't attract the same interest and may be commented upon only in papers with a regular legal column. Even this is not quite the same as the paper itself taking an editorial stand on such issues. Editorials on the Shah Bano, conjugal rights and stridhana verdicts, were very predictable. But, how many editorials were there on such landmark judgements as the Supreme Court ruling in C. B. Muthamma's petition against discriminating IFS rules? Or the Kerala High Court's strictures on the state government for its bias against recruitment of women?

The Bombay High Court judgement upholding the ban on "night work" for women did not arouse any editorial comment. Ban on night work has been a complex issue for women all over the world and there is much debate on whether

it is a discriminatory law or a necessary piece of protective legislation. The pros and cons of the subject figure in feminist research writings and in ILO journals, but for the general media, to comment on a topic like this not only means having a committed perspective, but also delving deeply into the sociological background of the issue. Simpler and easier then, to stick to rape and dowry and perhaps marriage and divorce.

Committed Writers

It is only when there are individual writers, both staffers and freelancers, committed to the women's cause, that the issues generally neglected by the media get written about, or commented upon. A topic like former President Zail Singh's mindless tirade against women who "refuse" to breastfeed was criticised only in the *Statesman* where an editorial and a longer, analytical piece were written by women staffers. Events which cry out for editorial comment — like establishment women in the capital observing Women's Day by offering flowers and prayers at Indira Gandhi's samadhi — raise no comment at all from the media's predominantly male editorial writers. A happening like the Maharashtra women farm workers' response to Sharad Joshi's call at Chetwad was widely reported by the media in November1986. But only a few writers — in the *Express Magazine*, *Statesman* and *EPW* — attempted to analyse the phenomenon from a feminist perspective and point to the limitations of Sharad Joshi's radicalism. (The *Financial Express* had a typical Women-Up-In-Arms heading for its report.)

Neglected Topics

Some current issues on which the media by and large has not taken an editorial stand:

Adverse effects on women of free trade zones which apparently increase women's employment prospects, and for which every state government today is clamouring. The anti-woman nature of government policy on the new reproductive technologies. The absence of a women's dimension in the new child-survival strategies. Need for working women's hostels and creches at the workplace. Sexual harassment at work... It's a long list and the best way of identifying topics ignored and overlooked by the general media is to take a look at the parallel feminist media, some of the UN journals, and left-wing periodicals where a range of topics of concern to women are written about perceptively and with depth.

Missing Perspective: The Net-En case

Population policy is prominent among those issues which get written about without incorporating the women's perspective on reproductive rights. This was conspicuous in the way that the media covered the campaign by women's groups against Net-En, the injectable contraceptive.

During 1983-85, there were many sympathetic reports in the Indian media on the way Depo Provera, another injectable contraceptive, was being misused on disadvantaged women in other Asian countries. Yet, when women's groups in India first began to raise questions about the government's proposal to introduce Net-En, the media showed no enthusiasm, mainly because it subscribes to the establishment stand that the country faces disaster if population growth is not curbed.

To recount a personal experience: In April 1985, when feminists in Hyderabad demonstrated against an injectables camp at the Patancheru Primary Health Centre, I sent a news report on the protest, along with photographs taken by an activist, to *Sunday*. It was neither published nor returned. A longer, analytical piece on the protest and elaborating the feminist stand on population policy sent to *Patriot* met the same fate. (I must mention here that at that time I was frequently contributing to both papers on topics related to women and health. Their not using the Net-En pieces was undoubtedly because of their uneasiness over the feminist viewpoint on family planning.) Interestingly, it was only after my piece on this protest was published in *The Lancet* that some publicity could be generated, and subsequently the Indian Council of Medical Research even invited representatives from women's groups to a dialogue!

In any case, finding both the media and the medical establishment indifferent, it was decided at a meeting in Hyderabad by women's groups from different places, in September 1985, that the only way to make the authorities sit up and take notice was to petition the Supreme Court. In May 1986 when this petition was finally admitted by the highest court in the land, the media was compelled to report it at least as a piece of legal news.

However, while most newspapers did report the bare news of the petition, in subsequent feature articles published by the glossies, the analysis was uneven, and in many instances the feminist perspective got clouded over. *Sunday*, for example chose to sensationalise the issue by drawing a far-fetched and inaccurate parallel with the thalidomide disaster and thereby did the campaign a gross disservice.[2] (Incidentally, *Sunday* had no qualms over using, without so much as a by-your-leave, the photographs I had earlier sent with the Patancheru report, the one they had refused to publish!)

The comments of Saheli, a women's group in Delhi and one of the main petitioners, on media coverage of the Net-En case are relevant here:

"The Net-En campaign offers a good case study of the reactions of the press. As soon as the court case was filed, press releases were sent to all the newspapers and the major English and language magazines. The ones that printed anything, did so in the language appropriate to their stand vis-a-vis the government.

"Quite a few journalists came to us subsequently to write a story. However, most were too impatient to listen long enough to understand the issue in all its complexity. The petition was too long and bulky to read, and so many a journalist ended up reading the press release, and the resolution of the Indian Women Scientists' Association (IWSA) and then wanted to know what all had been printed about this issue by other magazines or newspapers. Their meagre understanding of the issue made it impossible for them to ask relevant questions and so their way out was to force us to answer questions in black and white. For instance: 'Are you against injectables?' Any answers which attempted to look at injectables in a social

'Neutral-Objective' articles: No Stand!

context were thrown out. The whole problem of giving women sufficient information, sympathetic medical care before and during contraceptive use, the potential of abuse in a target-oriented FP programme were ignored by most journalists. In an attempts to write something sensational, as usual the cancer risk got far more prominence than it deserved and all other complications either took a back-seat or didn't figure at all.

"Even after we stressed the need to write accurately about the hazards of the injection, and pointed out how some reports had already carried misinformation, the reaction of most journalists was to avoid writing about unclear aspects rather than attempt to understand...Perhaps the worst experience is when a journalist does not understand the issue at hand but attempts to judge the value of the information according to 'credentials'. There is obviously no way of having a reasonable discussion because the Director General of Health Services or a doctor with a string of degrees automatically carries more weight with such a person."[3]

Chingari, a women's group in Ahmedabad and another co-petitioner in the Net-En case, reports similar experiences.[4] Only one Ahmedabad daily published the news item on the petition, released by a Delhi news agency. None of the other papers took it up even after Chingari put out local press releases. One Gujarati daily chose this as the time to publish a pro-injectables article, though it did also give space for the group's rejoinder.

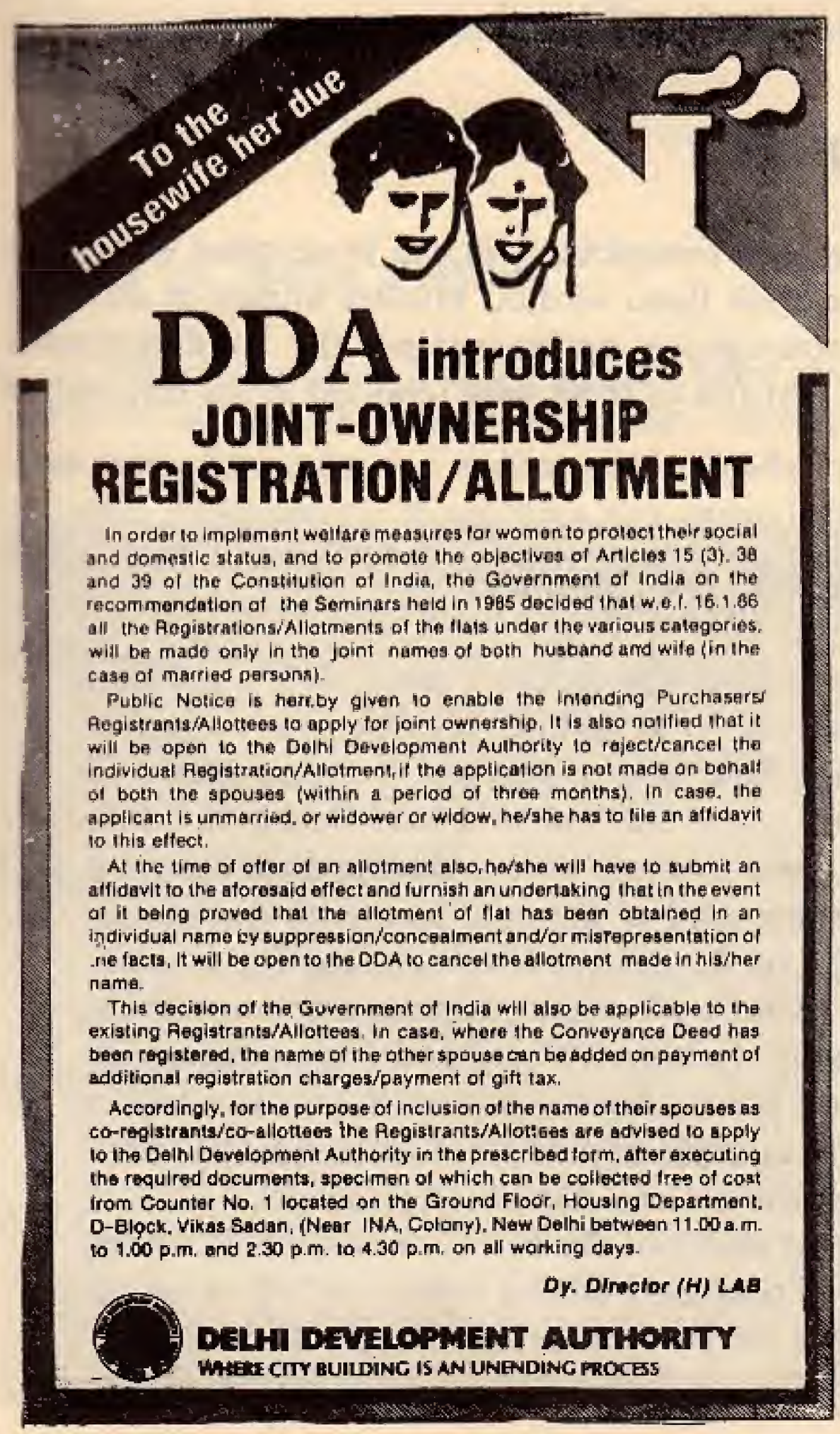
Altogether, it may be said that media coverage on the Net-En case was patchy and its effect in rousing public opinion was dubious. No paper took an editorial stand on injectables, though the *Statesman* did publish a mild edit questioning the ethics of trying out on India women a drug not sanctioned for use in the advanced countries.

Sex-choice Technologies

Sex-choice technologies is another issue where the media, which went to town on female foeticide and the misuse of amniocentesis, took no stand on the emerging, more pernicious implications of the newer, more sophisticated methods. All news items on these methods have had the "neutral-objective" tone, and no edits have pointed to the link between misuse of amniocentesis and misuse of the newer methods.[5]

Restricted Coverage

In early 1987, the Delhi Development Authority announced that all house allotments and registrations would henceforth be in the joint names of both spouses.



The DDA announcement: Not Covered in the National Media

It was an important statement of commitment, by a government department, to the issue of women's right to ownership of matrimonial home and property. Not surprisingly, it was challenged in the High Court by a Delhi male, and a stay order obtained.

The DDA news was of course reported by the Delhi papers, and the *Times of India* and *Statesman* had excellent articles by women reporters who quoted the views of feminist lawyers, and also looked at the different legal implications of the DDA announcement. It was an important issue for Indian women and *Manushi* too published a detailed article on it. (No.39, 1987)

However, the national media seemed to consider the DDA move as being of local interest in Delhi only, and there was no reportage on it in the dailies published from other cities. If women all over the country were aware of the DDA controversy, they might be stimulated to demand similar moves by other state government housing schemes in their own cities and towns. This is a good example of media persons failing to recognise when and why "local" news items deserve wider dissemination in public interest. The same could be said of many judgements, especially by the lower courts, where a progressive stand has been taken on a women's issue and is likely to provide inspiration to women elsewhere, but gets reported as local news in local media only.

Blind Spot in Hyderabad *Express*

This lack of perspective has been conspicuous in the Hyderabad edition of the *Indian Express*. Soon after the Shah Bano verdict, Muslim women in different parts of the country initiated courageous moves against the fundamentalist establishment of their community. Yet few of these were reported in the Hyderabad

A boost for bigamy

Polygamy is something which gives the media a thrill. With headings like 'Bigamy Blues' and 'Hero of 35 weddings', bigamy news is usually reported as an adventurous lark rather than as a crime liable to prosecution and punishment under the Indian Penal Code. In 1985, the dailies and the glossies went to town over a Bihar polygamist. He was played up like he was some kind of national hero who had almost made it to the Guiness Book of Records. Even a government medium like Doordarshan, in M.J.Akbar's *Newsline* programme, boosted the law-breaker to celebrity status. Neither TV nor the print media tried to examine the loopholes in the present bigamy law which enable violators to go scot free. A more recent example of media's vicarious identification with the polygamist is from the *Deccan Chronicle* (June 30, 1987). A PTI report on the customs and mores of the Ho tribals refers to, among other things, the prevalence of polygamy among them. The report carries a box with the heading: "They can love and marry any number of girls!"

Express which, in fact, diligently published the press releases of the pro-personal law section which was also politically vocal. Considering the existence of a large Muslim population in Hyderabad, one would have expected the paper to realise that news of actions by Muslim women elsewhere would be most relevant and inspiring to local Muslim women.

An important event in Ahmedabad in 1985, when 50 Muslim women formed a "sangh" to help divorcees, was front-paged by the Ahmedabad *Indian Express* and placed opposite the edit page in the Bombay *Express*. It found no mention at all in the Hyderabad edition. This despite the fact that it was not an agency report but one actually filed by an *Express* staffer.

More recently, in 1987, at a meeting in Pune to condemn the Deorala sati incident, one woman told a touching tale of how she would have been forced to commit "sati" by her in-laws, but drew courage to withstand them by remembering that in the Ramayana, Dasaratha's widows did not choose to immolate themselves. A report on this meeting by an *Express* staffer appeared in the Bombay edition of the *Express*, but again found no space in the Hyderabad edition, though this edition unfailingly published all the pronouncements on sati by politicians in different cities.

Values of Media Persons

There is no doubt that the media's blind spot is closely related to the personal values of key media persons, and their conventional norms on what is news and what isn't. The only way a dent can be made in this (and is being made already in some newspapers) is through the initiatives of committed media persons, sympathetic to or part of the movement. They bring a radically different perception in their approach to news and issues, and the "angles" from which these are presented. But since they are small in number, the dominant section overlooks them.

References and Notes

1. Response to questionnaire. For details see section on SEWA in chapter 'Blow Hot Blow Cold'.
2. 'Thalidomide babies? This time in India?' by Ritu Sarin, *Sunday*, September 14, 1986.
3.& 4.

   Responses to questionnaire.
5. Media coverage on topics like Net-En, sex-choice research, test-tube babies, has generally been in the form of "presenting both sides of the question". Where it's a question of medical scientists saying one thing and activist groups another, the former seem to have a higher credibility with both media persons and the public. There is also the effect of readers selecting the view which falls in with their own ideology.

Through the Looking Glass
How the Media Twists the Picture

Media's twisting of the women's question is done mainly through the reinforcement of traditional values. Distortion also creeps in as a result of the casual and superficial attitude of media persons to the women's question. While the former is derived from the conservative and pro-status-quo nature of the media, the latter reflects the general indifference among media people to understand what the women's movement is all about.

Backward Looking

Consider the following headings:

Motherhood at home front is exciting

Being away from family isn't good

Women prefer happiness to career success

Women in workplace unhappy

They prefer to be housewives

All these are headlines from the *Hindu*. Many of the items have been reproduced by arrangement with foreign newspapers. If the *Christian Science Monitor* publishes an article on women preferring motherhood, or the dilemma of working women, you can be sure that the *Hindu* will reproduce it.

However, social change is never smooth or problem free. In India and in the world, where women are questioning old values and roles, they are bound to face conflict. They know this and they don't need the *Hindu* or any other paper to go on and on about it. To focus exclusively on "the problems of liberation" as it were, and imply that the old values serve women's interests better is reactionary but not untypical of the establishment media.

Successful feminist struggles too get featured in the foreign press but would the *Hindu* dream of reproducing these items? This newspaper, with its regular back-page homilies from religious discourses on the sacred duties of the ideal wife, and along with its "thing" for motherhood, selectively reinforces and endorses traditional values while apparently focusing on the women's question. Its somewhat tepid coverage on, say, women construction workers, or an occasional didactic

piece on dowry are examples of a conservative newspaper's cautious efforts to keep up with the times while carefully remaining within its self-defined patriarchal limits.

"Post-feminism"

In the West, in the wake of recent feminist analysis and writings reappraising the position of women in the family, a trend has appeared by which the establishment is distorting this analysis into a "post-feminist" ideology. Books like Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage* are being misinterpreted to suggest that what women really want is to stay at home and have babies. However, as Margaret Gallagher points out, the central idea in the feminist reappraisal is to stress that women are calling for a radical restructuring of society and family so that they can have genuine and realistic options of combining work and family roles.[1]

This assertion gets twisted by being dubbed "post-feminist" and is reflected in media articles which suggest that feminists are "recanting", that men and women are "different" and that women themselves are coming full circle back to the old position. It is reported that the post-feminist concept may also pose a threat to, say, certain women's programmes on television. Some of these, which used to contain traditional fare, today incorporate a feminist perspective. Feminists feel that if these programmes were scrapped (on the ground that the "revolution" has fizzled out and they are no longer relevant) it would be a hard blow to the movement.

Some Readers Don't Digest

If the media generally acts to resist social change, the reason to some extent is that readers are as much a part of the old patriarchal order as the media controllers. Hostile responses to feminist ideas are a familiar feature of letters-to-editor columns. However, this "reader response" is sometimes a case of the critics being vocal while the supporters have not thought it necessary to sit down and dash off letters to editors welcoming the paper's stand or coverage on this or that issue.

For example, in the early 80s, a national daily, which then had two feminist writers on its staff, was publishing a good number of news reports and analytical features on the women's question. It is learnt that a small number of readers, close to the management, had objected to the kind of ideas the paper was propagating, and the management had even toyed with the idea of ordering a "toning down" of such writing. As the activist who told me of this incident remarked: "We realised then that every time one comes across a good report or article on women, one must write and say so — so that the media people don't think that only criticism exists."

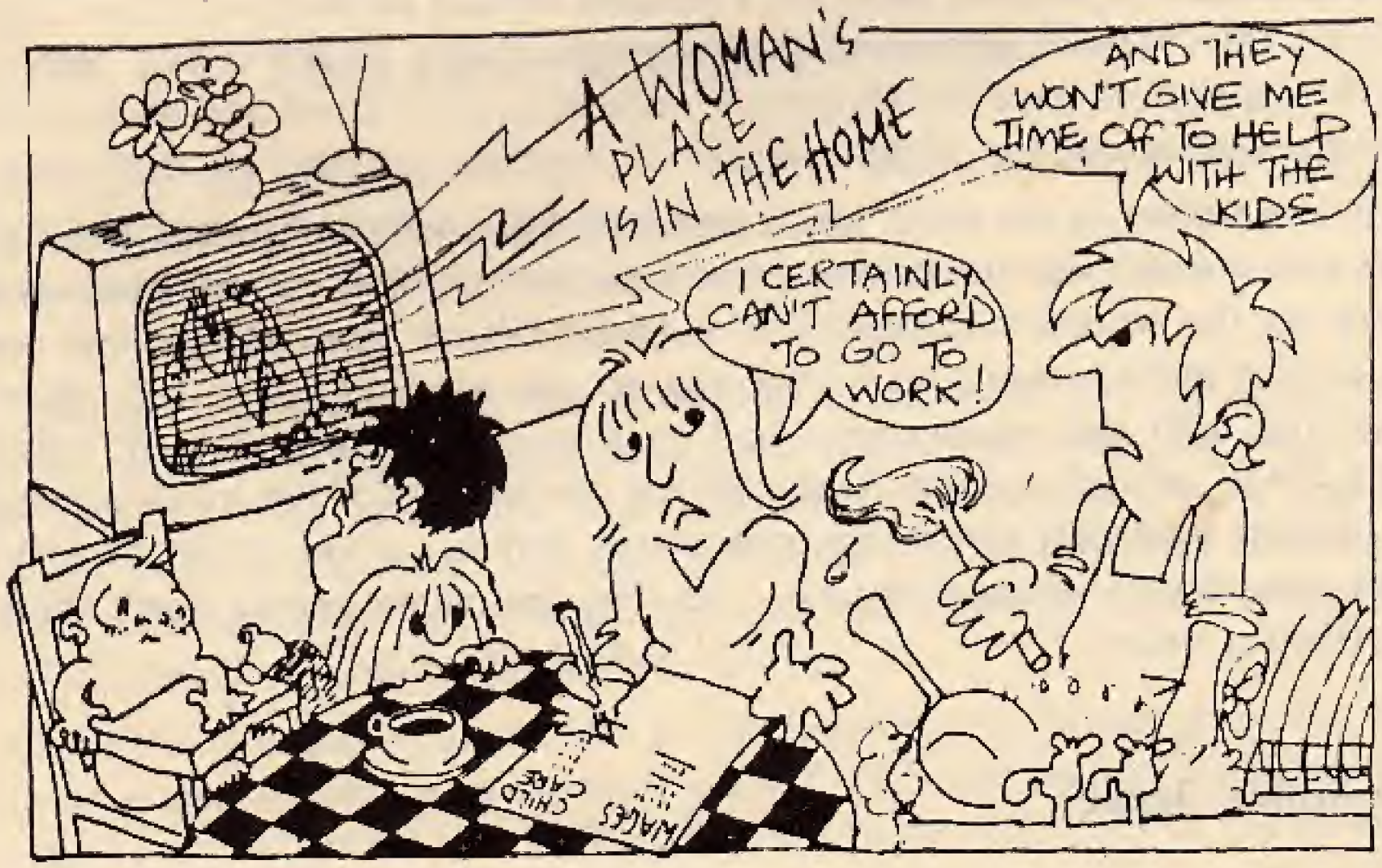
A Complex Issue

There are several complex reasons for media propagating particular values, especially on the question of women's images and roles. In her analysis of short

stories in women's magazines, Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) had shown how the the stories of the 30s and 40s had depicted adventurous young women, involved in careers and interested in "doing things" even if they were also shown to fall in love with and marry handsome young men. No "marriage or career" options were posed by these stories. Later, in the 50s and 60s, the theme changed and the new heroines were all eager and anxious to be good wives and mothers and those who had jobs felt it was in their family's interests to give them up and devote themselves to husband and children. This was one way in which the "feminine mystique" was propagated.

As I see it, one explanation for this change in approach may lie in the historical situation. The earlier theme obviously was a response to the mood of the War years, when women's active contribution outside the house was needed in the national interest. Later, when the men returned from the War, unemployment and other difficulties of the post-War period required that women be pushed back into their homes and domestic roles. This example of how the media reflects and caters to establishment thinking shows that it can happen without any sort of "official" or "government" directive. For, the media itself subscribes to the same establishment values. And this reinforcement can take place in the so-called "open" as well as the so-called "closed" societies.

For example, a recent research paper on women in Soviet short stories of the 80s has shown that the wife-mother role is being glorified even while conceding that women are working at the same kind of jobs as men in Soviet society.[2] My own view is that this stress on the importance of family to women may well be an extension of official Soviet concern over deteriorating family life and an anxiety to raise the birth-rate. (Soviet women today are being offered incentives to have more babies.) Interestingly, despite ideological commitment to the concept of sex-equality, Soviet attitudes to the sex-based division of labour are no different from those professed in "free" America.



(ISIS International Bulletin No.18, 1981

The Media and Sati

The media's patriarchal attitudes are deeply entrenched and die hard. This was strikingly seen in the way some newspapers glorified the sati incident of September 4, 1987 in Deorala village of Rajasthan. It is reported that the regional language press, with the exception of the *Navbharat Times* largely took a retrograde pro-sati stand. In Delhi, the Janwadi Mahila Samiti stormed into the office of the editor of the Hindi paper, *Jansatta*, demanding a public apology for publishing a pro-sati editorial. And about 60 writers and journalists reportedly denounced the *Jansatta* editorial and said that they would not write for the paper unless it published an unconditional apology for its editorial.

It is not only the regional press which has revealed its conservative outlook on Sati. In fact even senior journalist N.J.Nanporia (former editor of the *Times of India*) had said in the *Afternoon Despatch and Courier* that Sati as a "concept" was at one time "meaningful" in the Asian tradition.

Religion Glorified

Media's reinforcement of old values keeps cropping up in statements and articles harking back to the "high status" of women in an earlier golden age, and propagating the idea that Hindu religion in its "purity" ensured that women were held in high honour. For example, an article on Tantra (*Sunday Review*, June 21, 1987) argues that the tantriks brought about "women's liberation peacefully, imperceptibly and gracefully in this country". Hindu religious leaders in their discourses today sometimes borrow phrases from the women's movement to support their traditional stand, like the Swamiji who cited Sita's decision to accompany Rama to the forest despite his protests as an example of "true" women's liberation! (In one of *Hindu's* back-page homilies.)[3]

It doesn't add up

"Many young women now say they'd pick family over career", the *New York Times* reported deceptively in a front page story on December 28, 1980. But a closer look at those same figures does not justify that headline — for it seemed that only 27% of the women in that study thought mothers shouldn't be working at all when children were between two and five years old. Fifty per cent thought mothers should work part-time and 16% full-time. As Ellen Goodman warned, such headlines make a self-fulfilling prophecy of the retreat to traditionalism."

— Friedan, 1981

Women up in arms against injectible contraceptives

Women farmers up in arms

Manipuri women on the warpath

Lanka feminists on warpath

Women of the night unite

The feminine mystique

CALCUTTA/Ella Datta

"Instant" Headings

This chapter has concentrated on media's backward looking characteristic as the principal method of twisting the women's question. Another manifestation of the same is media's casual attitude to the movement and its refusal to take it seriously: visible evidence of this can be seen in the way headings are worded.

There are headings which denigrate "liberation" and "the libbers" but what I refer to here are the mindless "instant" ones which reflect the total lack of interest of the average sub-editor in women's issues. There are three types of "instant" headings:

** Any serious article analysing the women's dimension can be safely headlined 'The Feminine Mystique' or 'Sexual Politics', or failing that, 'The Second Sex'. The headline writer isn't bothered what the text is about, except that it is some kind of feminist stuff. And everyone is familiar with the titles of the early feminist classics, so what more does a reader need or want?

** Headings for a demonstration, a protest or a rally are often a choice between 'Women Up in Arms' and 'Women on the Warpath'. The basic who-what-where-and-why principle for a good headline, highlighting the salient features of a report, can be happily dispensed with here. Something which no sub-editor could get away with if the item were on, say, a protest by junior doctors, a political party or a trade union.

** A favourite heading for a report on a seminar or a conference is: 'Women of the World Unite'. The subject discussed could be health, employment or atrocities, but the heading will be the same and will tell you nothing about what the article or item is really about. In fact, this is an all-purpose heading for anything on women, not just conferences or seminars. I've personally had this heading being

given to at least three of my articles at different points of time, on different women's issues, by one weekly journal!

They Do It With Mirrors

Distortion comes in many forms and the images are best left to speak for themselves. As the following random examples do, eloquently:

China: Women and the Two Faces of Big Brother

"An altogether different picture emerges in relation to the women and media relationship in China. Various studies of imagery in children's books report the extent to which these challenge traditional Western perception of sex roles, and provide positive models for girls. A fascinating and detailed study of the relationship between feminism and socialism in China by Elizabeth Croll traces the role of the media — primarily the press — in reflecting the twin development of feminist and political concerns from the beginning of the twentieth century. In a political environment of awareness of the potential economic and social contribution of women, the press acted to raise the consciousness of women towards the particular form of cultural aggression historically directed against them... A tendency of one major women's magazine to promote familiar Western values, such as the achievement of happiness through the family or the attractions of good food, was stamped out in a firm political action during the Cultural Revolution in 1966 by the removal of the editor of the paper. The 'real' concerns of women were redefined, not only in the press, but in films, operas and ballets, as politics and production. Heroines were portrayed only in leadership roles. But this was no solution to the fundamental problem. For the media revealed the same sort of stereotyped vision — showing no hint of the competing demand that real women in such positions actually faced. Croll's interviews with women in 1973, for example, indicated a feeling that government and media had neglected the specific difficulties inherited by women from their historical past through their reproductive roles.

"Media portrayals of women in China probably present the most extreme example of how, in a historically brief time-span, the mass media can make a major contribution to a revolutionary reversal of women's self-image and of social definitions of women's roles. Clearly, the importance of government intervention in the process is paramount, the success — or otherwise — of media in promoting acceptance of change being directly related to the adequacy of political conceptualisation of women's problems and their solution.

"As yet little information is available concerning the role of the media in China's new political climate, and in the opening up of its cultural

The Mix that Sells: The women's page in *Indian Express* (November 14, 1981) has this typical hotch-potch. A lead article on an American girl who learnt Bharat Natyam; a critical article 'The Ugly side of Beauty Contests'; a piece on the significance of Hindu marriage glorifying the old order and warning against modern values; an IIM study on women's employment: 'Making it to the top still a struggle'. Along with the critique on beauty contests a news item announced that 'Venezuelan girl is Miss World,' and 'Cashing in on fashion' is about a handloom expo show, complete with pictures of models.

Invisible Decade? The December 31, 1985 issue of *India Today* was an anniversary number of the journal on completing a decade of its existence (1975-1985)— ironically coinciding with the Women's Decade. 'The Decisive Decade' issue a visual recap of events and personalities that dominated the decade — people who made headlines, the rise of the middle class, the day of the farmer, small entrepreneurs, satirical tributes to various personalities, first-person accounts, TV, cinema, sport, newsmakers — the lot.

and economic activities to outside influence...Already there are some signs that a new media imagery (with a well-known orientation) is creeping in. A British commentator has described the techniques used to advertise colour television sets, on sale for what amounted to three years' wages for the average worker:

'Though the brand name differs, the marketing approach is the same everywhere. An entire shop window has been filled with the products of the company concerned, in the home setting of a model consumer family — Mum and Dad plus child. Dad looks Eurasian, and is listening to his stereo on a headset. Mum has an apron, blonde hair and nice European legs. She may be doing the ironing or using one of those new vacuum cleaners which can get into all the corners. The son in the Toshiba display is wearing a Snoopy shirt and looking bored. The daughter in the Sony display is wearing shorts and has the looks of a trim nymphet. It is all absolutely amazing for the crowd, rarely less than a hundred strong, pressing its collective nose against the shop window.'

"Such developments await detailed and systematic analysis. They appear to offer one of the clearest contemporary illustrations of the relationship between values and political ideology, between individual self-perception and economic policies, between women and socio-economic systems. For as the British report concludes: 'The masses do not demand, unprompted, expensive goodies from abroad. Just as the ads have replaced the quotations from Mao on the bill boards, so these inviting displays are an act of official propaganda, a deliberate attempt to substitute the myths of consumer socialism for those of a revolution which went wrong.' "

— extracted from Gallagher, 1981

Not a mention about the Women's Decade, though. And in 'Happenings in Indian Media', among the comments on new magazines, new newspapers, not a word about *Manushi*, the country's first and only feminist journal with a national readership and an international standing.

Liberation is almost a four-letter word: A lead article in the *Astrological Magazine* (April 1987) 'Planets and the Working Women', analyses the horoscopes of women with "remarkable careers" — among others, a doctor, an Italian actress, and a famous musician who is described as "a perfect anti-thesis of today's liberated woman. Yet she has been more successful in her career than any of her more liberated, assertive contemporaries."

Prize Pigs: An announcement in *Caravan* (April 1, 1987), with the heading 'Woman Woes', says: "Have you ever been amused, annoyed, exhilarated or harassed by women? Tell us about it in 500 words. Prize of Rs.25 for each published anecdote." The same issue has an advertisement for sister magazine, *Woman's Era*, which is described as a magazine for "enlightened readers" who "constantly strive to enrich their lives, build happy homes and improve their personality."

Sita is Sacred: An item in the 'Small Screen' column of *Sunday* (June 21, 1987) reports, in loaded language, a protest by a group of women against the depiction of Sita as a docile slave in Ramanand Sagar's TV Serial *Ramayan*: "Stumped by the criticism, Sagar could do nothing but mumble something about women-libbers who wanted to liberate 'even Sita'. At least, he despaired, they could have spared mythology from the fury of the women's liberation movement."

References and Notes

1. Personal communication from Margaret Gallagher on the phenomenon of "post-feminism". Information on this in this chapter is drawn from newspaper cuttings sent by her. Ms.Gallagher has done some pioneering studies on women and the media for UNESCO.
2. Paper by Kamakshi Balasubramaniam of Russian Department, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, presented at a 1985 meeting organised by Anveshi, a women's studies group in Hyderabad.
3. A well-known Swamiji of the Ramakrishna Mission has cited Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage* as an example of "even" Western feminists acknowledging the importance of family life. He was speaking on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Saradamani, wife of Ramakrishna, and went on to cite her life as the model for Indian womanhood.

Ugly Sisters
The Media's Hostility to Feminism

The media's treatment of the women's question can be summed up in the dictum: "Selective coverage on women's oppression, yes, but feminism, no." Sympathetic reportage on injustices to women do not imply endorsement of feminist campaigns against them or support for feminist actions in general. It is quite predictable for an article on innocent girls in West Bengal jails carrying an

introduction saying: "In India, women are the weaker sex, often destined to bear the cross of neglect and exploitation..." This is from the *Illustrated Weekly* (July 5, 1987), a journal, whose anti-feminist stand has been both explicit and implicit.[1] Yet, this is the magazine which has also given coverage to important women's issues as diverse as Muslim Personal law and amniocentesis.

This article on girls in West Bengal jails was a focus on the work of a male activist lawyer, and the author had alleged that women's groups had done nothing on this issue. The picture was set right by a rejoinder from a Calcutta women's group, describing its activities on the issue, which included a hunger strike outside the government headquarters. The attitude underlying the allegation is an example of the ingrained hostility to feminist groups.[2]

Media's hostility to feminism has to be seen in the context of media sociology as a whole. Studies have shown that media acts to preserve the dominant values of society — and this includes patriarchy. Feminism, by going to fundamentals, and questioning values which are deeply entrenched, and accepted as "givens", is a threat to the comfortable patriarchal order of which media persons, both men and women, are themselves a part. Though, like all decent folk, they of course abhor dowry deaths, rape and atrocities on women.

An Ugly Face for Feminism

So, while reporting on the more blatant and visible forms of exploitation, and acknowledging that injustice must be fought, media's attitude is that feminism is not the way to go about it. But then it is feminist groups who are exposing and waging struggles against oppression, and so reportage on them and their campaigns, through distortions in headings and texts, devalues their activities and creates new stereotypes which project feminism in an ugly light. The message is that feminists are an unattractive and frustrated lot, extremists who reflect the opinion of a small minority; that most women themselves don't want radical change; that women are their own enemies; that feminists are anti-male, anti-motherhood, pro-free-sex etc, etc.

He Doesn't Know

"I have never been able to understand precisely what women's lib is aimed at achieving. That all women should become men or vice versa? That reproductive arrangements should be transferred to the laboratory, thereby eliminating the necessity for women at all? That men should develop mammary glands so as to be able to take a turn at suckling? I just don't know."

— from *Things Past*
by Malcolm Muggeridge, 1978

Derogatory Labels

Media sociology has shown that rebels against the established order get depicted by the media as anti-social and as "deviants". Feminism as deviant behaviour is portrayed through snide references to the "bra-burning-brigade", and labels like "libbers", always used in a derogatory sense, through descriptions and headings, which contradict the substance of a piece of news. Hostility also comes in the form of comments (including letters to editors) running down feminism and women's groups or alleging that they seek publicity without doing anything worthwhile.

Contradictory

Consider for example, this mocking reference in the *Illustrated Weekly* 'Idiot Box' column (February 15, 1987) to activist Indira Jaisingh as "the fire-spitting, crusading lady lawyer". The item is about Ms. Jaisingh's petition in the Supreme

Get your facts straight, no bras were ever burnt

"Aparna is not the kind of Greer who is rabidly into bra-burning or changing history into her story for the skewed feminism..."

— Mukul Sharma
in *Filmfare*, Feb 16, 1987

"Unlike her sisters in the West, who have irrevocably burnt their bridges and their bras..."

— Guest Editor Pritish Nandy's note
in *Sunday's* 1981 *Annual*
on 'The Indian Women'

The following is an extract from *Sweet Freedom* (Coote and Campbell, 1982):

"In 1968, the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, USA was the scene of the first public manifestation of a new wave of feminism. For about two years before that, small numbers of American women had begun to meet and talk to each other, to organise and to develop their own political theory. They took the view that the Miss America pageant degraded *all* women, contestants and viewers alike; its fake standards of beauty forced women to push and pull their bodies into alien, uncomfortable shapes, merely for the pleasure of men. They decided to stage a protest — and to illustrate their point they dumped bras and girdles into a 'Freedom Trash Bucket'. *Imaginary flames were added later by a news agency reporter, and the idea caught on in a big way.* (my emphasis) The media loved it — sexy and absurd, it neatly disposed of a phenomenon which would otherwise have proved rather awkward to explain."

Court against Doordarshan for cutting out crucial portions of her comments on the Muslim women's Bill. Apart from the trivialising language, the items gets further devalued by its placement in a column which is devoted to inane and often malicious gossip about film and television personalities.

There is also contradiction in the fact that the *Weekly* itself has devoted much space to serious articles analysing and commenting on the Shah Bano issue and the Muslim Women's Bill which came in its wake. Further, the *Weekly* also likes to project itself as a crusader against government authoritarianism and censorship. Logically it ought to be making a complimentary rather than a tongue-in-cheek reference to someone taking courageous action on both these issues. The *Weekly's* treatment of the item waters down the importance of the petition while it also casts doubts on the credibility of its "champion of causes" self-image.

Hostile Headings

Hostile stereotyping occurs in headlines like 'Nature Nags Liberated Women' (*Times of India*, June 8, 1987) and 'Danish Women Die of Liberation' (*Times of India*, August 18, 1986). The former item quotes a research study which showed that many successful women in the USA are single because of a shortage of suitable partners. The latter is an item on suicide rates among women in Denmark where, despite "liberation', women face many problems at home and at the workplace. In both cases the headings give an unwarranted slant to an objective piece of news.

'Feminists' Aggressive Stance' is the heading for an item in the *Hindu* (October 27, 1985) on preparations for a meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus in Chicago. It is a long report and I searched and searched through the paragraphs but couldn't find out why feminists were described as adopting an aggressive stance. Something in the last para gave an inkling which explained but did not justify the heading — a comment to the effect that many non-activist and "moderate" women feel alienated because militant feminists project an "aggressive" image which they cannot identity with. And yet, the theme of the meeting, as described in the first few paras of the report, was: what steps are needed for the movement to broaden its base, by reaching out to more women, the younger ones and the "reluctant joiners" who have so far felt that they are outsiders.

Not What We Meant

Around 1969, when that anti-man, anti-family, bra-burning image of women's lib was built up in *Newsweek* and *Time* cover stories exaggerating the antics of the most extremist voices in the movement, I remember the helpless feeling shared by the founding mothers of NOW (National Organisation of Women): "But that's not what we meant, not at all."

— Friedan, 1981

Hostility to Feminist Groups

"Women's libbers in India are a pitiable lot." This is the opening sentence of an article by a male columnist in the *Sunday Review* of the *Times of India* (March 25, 1984), which then goes on to say that Indian feminists are misguidedly adopting irrelevant Western concepts and ideals. This is typical of the general sort of tirade common in articles by male writers, but specific attacks also occur as in this article from the *Telegraph* (July 24, 1985) with the heading: 'Feminist leaders are just publicity hogs.' It was written around the time of the Nairobi conference and is a vicious attack on prominent feminists who planned to attend the Nairobi meet. Quoting data on atrocities against Indian women, the article alleged that most of the women who are vocal in the movement are an elitist, trendy lot who are out to extract the maximum advantage for themselves at the cost of those who are really oppressed. None of these allegations were supported by factual data but were sweeping and unsubstantiated generalisations.

Hostility of this sort keeps cropping up in articles and readers' letters alleging that "women's groups are doing nothing". A letter in the *Times of India* (June 26, 1986) for example, praises the work of two male researchers in Bombay for highlighting the continued prevalence of female foeticide and then criticises women's groups for being inactive on the issue. Fortunately there were adequate rejoinders stating that but for the initiatives of women's groups there would have been no

Easy to Blame

"Mr. P. Chidambaram, Union Minister of State for Home, is reported to have said while discussing the 'sati' of Roop Kanwar and the so-called 'celebrations' that followed, that 'women's organisations had not been actively fighting such social practices'.

"It is a matter of record that it was indeed women's organisations which moved the Rajasthan High Court challenging the 'Chunri Mahotsav'. This focused the nation's attention on how vital it is to 'actually fight' barbaric social practices. If public opinion has begun to coalesce, it is largely through the activities of a number of women's groups and organisations.

"The Minister states with equanimity that the police 'could not have done anything at that stage', when there were more than two lakh persons at the village. Curiously though, he is ready to transfer the blame of the shameful lapse to voluntary groups, including women's organisations.

"Women's groups are for the large part voluntary organisations. The government would do well to support them, instead of telling them to do what is in the first place the government's job."

— Letter in the *Hindu* (October 12, 1987) by members of Anveshi, a women's studies group in Hyderabad

campaign against female foeticide and that even now it is the women's movement which is keeping alive the struggle to make government enforce curbs on the misuse of amniocentesis. One of the male researchers himself also wrote a letter stressing the importance of the work done by women's groups on this issue.

The Squabblers

Another favourite media distortion is to propagate the idea that women's groups are constantly quarrelling among themselves. (Internal debates and differences among, say, the left parties, are never depicted in the same trivialising manner).

'Differences among women's groups fighting against sati' is the heading for an item in the *Hindu* (October 8, 1987). It suggests misleadingly, a picture of unseemly squabbles. What the report actually says is that autonomous women's groups who had been active and vocal in condemning the September 1987 sati incident in Rajasthan had objected to women MPs and MLAs of the Congress-I associating themselves with their campaign. At a public meeting they told these women politicians not to sit on the dais with the real organisers. Their point was that the ruling party had displayed a deplorable apathy on the sati incident, had not even condemned it until public opinion was aroused, and was now trying to use women party members to cash in on the public mood.

Anti-Motherhood?

Then there are the references to feminists in articles and editorials which reflect the prevailing misconceptions regarding feminist ideology. Like the editorial in the *Hindustan Times* (February 15, 1987) entitled 'Towards Safe Motherhood,' commenting on current WHO strategies. The editorial stresses the serious implications of the high maternal mortality rate, and could be described as pro-women, but in the very opening sentence reveals itself as anti-feminist by saying: "At a time when *even* the feminist movement has begun to appreciate the virtues of motherhood..." (My emphasis. The establishment likes to depict feminism as being anti-motherhood)

"Not Feminist"

Anti-feminist attitudes are revealed in the way people describe themselves, or a book or a film as being "not feminist". Indira Gandhi's famous statement, "I am not a feminist", provided much grist to the media mill. A film like Aparna Sen's *Paroma*, when praised by male critics like Pritish Nandy, gets prefaced with the statement that it is *not* a feminist film. An article[3] on Satyajit Ray's much acclaimed film, *Mahanagar*, begins by asserting that it is not a feminist film, but then goes on to describe statements made by the film which feminists would recognise as concepts that they support.

In the 'Books' section of *Sunday* (March 1, 1987), David Davidar reviews *A Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and describes it as "a non-feminist novel

WHY, WHEN WOMEN ORGANIZE, ARE OUR EFFORTS SEEN AS INANE, RIDICULOUS, NONSENSICAL ? ? ?

examples...

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON:

1975 IWY WORLD CONFERENCE...

FEMINISTS FIGHT AT MEETING

Daily Telegraph (Australia), 17 June 1975

FEMINISTS SCREAM INSULTS AT MEETING

Canberra Times (Australia) 30 June 1975

MUM'S THE WORD AS THE BIG YAK-YAK BEGINS

Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) 30 June 1975

1980 DECADE FOR WOMEN CONFERENCE...

CONFERENCE WOMEN SCUFFLE WITH POLICE

New York Times, 19 July 1980

UN WOMEN'S MEETING SNARLED IN POLITICS

Christian Science Monitor, 1 August 1980

A DISCORDANT CONCLUSION FOR WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

New York Times, 1 August 1980

The mass media should promote the Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, as well as other international, regional and national programmes for women, so that the public is made aware of such programmes and thus participate to a greater extent in their implementation.

Point 89, Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women, 19 September, 1980.

written from a feminine viewpoint''. From his description of the book and his comments on it, it is far from clear what the basis is of his distinction between feminist and feminine viewpoint.

Feminism Misunderstood

Unattractive and negative images of feminism are, of course, a result of media persons' distorted understanding of feminist ideology. Feminism misunderstood is one reason for feminism misrepresented, apart from the fact that feminism poses a threat to the established order. Hostile stereotyping is bound to persist unless the media people make a conscious effort to put aside preconceived notions about bra-burning libbers, and get acquainted through social science research and analysis, with feminist theory and practice.

And meanwhile, the equation of women's liberation with sexual promiscuity reigns prominently in the glossies. An ad for the August 1, 1987 issue of *Filmfare* shows actress Kimi Katkar in a provocative pose, with the heading 'Sex Sells'. The copy: ''The image of the Hindi film heroine has changed. So has audience taste. They are no longer hung up on the demure, fully-clad Sati-Savitris who'd blush at the mere mention of the word sex. Now they want them bold. They want them sizzling as Kimi Katkar confirms... ''

The ugly face of feminism and the ''sexy'' face of ''liberation'' are two versions of media's images of the movement, both inaccurate, both degrading and both subverting the women's question.

References and Notes

1. For example, the February 2, 1986 issue of the *Weekly* has an article, 'Feminism: Woman Today' by Rajni Bakshi on the December 1985 conference in Bombay of women's groups from all over the country. It is a positive, objective report on the reality of the movement, the positions it has taken and why, its internal debates, and says that women's groups are alive to the importance of linking up with the movements of other oppressed groups. And yet, on the contents page, the article is announced with the comment: ''Rajni Bakshi assesses the feminist movement in India and examines why it has failed to make much impact'' — conveying a negative assessment unjustified by the text of the article.
2. See chapter 'Blow Hot Blow Cold' for the experiences of activist groups with the media.
3. 'Patterns of change (*Mahanagar*)' by Satish Bahadur and Dr. Shyamala Vanarase in *Cine Woman* (Feb-March 1982).

It's One Big Joke
Trivialising the Women's Questions

'Love Pacts: Just Good Friends' is the heading for a report on the pernicious ''Maitrikarar'' practice in Gujarat. (*India Today*, December 15, 1981). The cartoon shows a man in bed with two women, confronted by a lawyer and another fat

angry female, obviously the wife. The concluding sentence of the report: "For the generally puritanical city of Ahmedabad, Maitrikarar is India's first step towards a higher standard of sinning."

(It may be mentioned here that women's groups have expressed concern over the legal loopholes which allow this practice to flourish, with many young women getting duped into entering "legal contracts" for cohabitation with already married men.)

Much has already been written about sexist humour in the media and examples of it are visible every day. A sexist comic strip like "The Lockhorns" regularly appears even in the women's magazine *Femina*, and sexism in "humorous" write-ups and cartoons are legion in the general media. The same journals which publish serious articles on the women's question also indulge in sexist humour, about which there is no need to elaborate here. What does need to be pointed out, however, is the way "humour" is used to subvert the efforts of the movement by trivialising those issues which are emerging as a result of the mood created by the decade. The above *India Today* item reflects this practice. Some more examples are given below:

Headings

** 'No More Baring Women on TV' is the heading in the *Times of India* (May 11, 1987) for a new government code to ensure "decent" portrayal of women on TV. (One can sense an almost wistful regret on the part of the sub-editor who wrote that heading.)

** 'No rape please, she's your wife' is a heading in *Patriot* (November 22, 1983). It is about a discussion in the Lok Sabha on a proposal that the new rape law should also be applicable to husbands by covering the incidence of rape within marriage.

** "Woman kicks the bucket for water' is a heading in *Newstime* (March 2, 1987) for an incident in which a woman hanged herself after a quarrel with her husband who refused to fetch drinking water from a nearby borewell.

** 'Pack up wives' is a heading in *Hindu* (November 16, 1985). It announces that expatriate workers in Bahrain have been told to send their wives home and accept salaries on the basis of a "bachelor" status or else face non-renewal of work contracts.

** 'It doesn't pay to kill wife' is a front-page heading in the Hyderabad edition of *Indian Express* (February 20, 1987) reporting the award of a life sentence to a businessman who murdered his pregnant wife.

Text and Cartoons

The 'Indianotes' column in *India Today* abounds with items which, through text and cartoons, have persistently reduced the most serious of news items on women's struggles to cruel jokes, in appallingly bad taste even by *India Today's* own not very exacting standards.

'Bottle of Wits' is the heading for an item on a Manipur women group's initiative to curb drunkenness among their menfolk (July 15, 1984). The women are referred to in the item as "bottle mamas" and the item begins: "Nobody, but nobody lets them boozers booze in peace... " Another item in this column (June 15, 1987) is about the nabbing of a bigamist. The heading is 'Bride Collector' and the cartoon shows a wedding in progress with the bridegroom being rapped on the shoulder by a police officer, accompanied by the first wife. The copy contains the usual "beware the wrath of spurned wife" stuff and concludes by saying that the "jilted" bride was married off to another eligible bachelor, the "prospective bigamist" promised to live with his first wife, and, therefore, "all's well that ends well."

Then there is the item in *Newstime* Sunday magazine (February 8, 1987) on a new rule in Hungary extending a couple's mandatory engagement period from the present thirty days to three months, as a move towards ensuring stable

BRIDE COLLECTOR

Cartoons by AJIT NINAN

■ These days, a girl can never be too sure about the bona fides of her prospective spouse, even if her parents are the ones who screen him. There was this young man from Madras, Harikrishnan, who developed a penchant for marrying nubile, pretty women. The first one, Chandrika, he married in 1981 but soon tired of her—and his two kids—and sent her crying back home.

When playing on everyone's sympathies at his so-called 'divorced' state began to pall, he decided to remarry. This time, the victim was to be his paternal cousin. The wedding date was set; the festivities began.

But beware the wrath of a spurned wife! When Chandrika got wind of the dastardly plot, she went straight to the police. They finally caught up with their prey—only half-an-hour before he was to be joined in unholy wedlock—and unmasked his marital past.

The prospective bigamist was then whisked away by the cops, but he made a quick escape by promising he would live happily ever after with Chandrika. And the jilted bride was married off to another 'eligible' bachelor from among the invitees. Finally, all's well that ends well.

LADIES FINGERS

■ The travails of public travel in a big city are common. Whether in buses or trains, which are invariably packed tighter than sardines, there are always the dextrous pickpockets to look out for.

These inhospitable creatures have a special hunting ground among the hapless train travellers from in and around the suburbs of Bombay. And their quick hands work best during rush hour, when the trains stream out of Churchgate station, carrying the teeming multitudes.

The pickpockets are now spreading their nets wider than before—into the hitherto safe haven of the ladies' compartments. Having recruited and trained women in the light fingered art, they have now unleashed them on an unsuspecting female public. Crowding into the doorway of the ladies' compartment of local trains, they wait till the train stops and the stampede to get out begins. And by the time the train glides out, the unfortunate travellers find that they have been divested of their necklaces and ear-rings, and, in some cases, their hand bags. The signs stating 'Ladies First' could have taken on a new and ominous meaning.

SON BURN

■ Most people will still go to any extent to have a son in spite of family planning campaigns. A 50-year-old father of four daughters in Junagadh district was recently all set to marry a 15-year-old girl in order to fulfil his heart's desire to have a son. But the would-be-bridegroom was in for a shock. He was forced to return empty-handed from his wedding, when the teenager he was to be married to, eloped with her young lover minutes before the *baarat* arrived.

Not one to admit defeat so easily—especially when the stakes were so high—the man pressured his would-be father-in-law to allow him to marry his younger daughter instead. The priest was roped in and an auspicious day and date worked out.

The bridegroom dressed up again and the procession wound its way to the bride's house. But this time, the whole thing ended with the indignant villagers disrupting the proceedings, raising slogans protesting the unseemly disparity in the ages of the two. Thwarted the second time, the bridegroom returned crestfallen but still hell-bent on finding someone who would give him a male heir.

marriages. The write-up contrasts this with the Indian situation where "every greedy bridegroom thinks that a good bride burning prevents a bad marriage". The cartoon shows a garlanded bridal couple, the groom scowling and the bride carrying a fire extinguisher.

'Third Edit'

Papers like the *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times* and occasionally the *Indian Express*, often use in their 'third edits' a very laboured brand of humour to comment on out-of-the-way news items, using these as a handle to mock the movement.

Anything for a Laugh

Manushi (No.9, 1981) reports on the media's trivialisation of an incident where the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Y. V. Chandrachud, asked Adesh Lata Jaspal, law student who was working as the clerk of an advocate, to leave his courtroom as she was wearing jeans:

"The Chief Justice said jeans were not a 'decent dress' and she should return to the court only if she was dressed in a sari. He also said that he was sure that saris were still available in the market. Adesh Lata enquired whether the Chief Justice was making a suggestion or giving a directive. If he was making a suggestion she was prepared to wear a salwar-kameez, but if it was a directive, she would file a suit. The Chief Justice said it was only a suggestion whereupon she complied with it.

"Newspapers the next day gave the incident front-page coverage, with headings such as 'Jeans are just ruled out' and 'Judgement on jeans'. One paper even printed Adesh's photo on the front page. Since then the incident has been used by the media to mock at women and to trivialise the actual issues involved. One 'progressive' Hindi weekly from Rajasthan went so far as to publish a lengthy diatribe against women under the title 'Why not jeans?' The writer of the article purports to be a henpecked husband whose wife is a leader of the women's movement and intends to make the judiciary 'committed' to women's right to wear jeans, as well as to campaign only for that parliamentary candidate who will uphold this right. The article was illustrated by an obscene cartoon.

"While the issue may appear trivial, it actually symbolises the all-pervasive double standards of our society, which are most obvious in those so-called shrines of justice — the courts. On what ground did the Chief Justice decree that the sari was the only 'decent dress' for women? If 'Indian origin' is to be the criterion for 'decency' then surely he and all other men should start wearing dhoti-kurta? What is so 'Indian' about the garb of lawyers and judges, which are grotesque remnants of colonial rule ?"

Not A Dumb Blonde

When asked if she had posed for a calendar with nothing on, Marilyn Monroe is reported to have replied, "Oh no. I had the radio on." However, despite such witticisms, she continued to be portrayed in the media and literature as the quintessential dumb blonde. Now at last a valiant attempt is being made to set her image right. But so intent are men in believing that the Irish are on all fronts simultaneously.

In Defence Of Women

Flippancy comes so easily to men when talking about women's problems that Union Minister of State Margaret Alva had a few harsh words to say to the male members of the Lok Sabha, last Thursday. This was after some of them had made references to the International Women's Day in a manner that was both sarcastic and patronising. The Minister, rightly, held forth on behalf of her kind and gave the male chauvinist members a bit of her mind. The men, for once, seemed to be at the receiving end. This must have left the more chauvinistic among them wondering "
time-tested game of tung
is the sort of thing Eve ha
trouble at the very begin
sport — and being in ch
Minister that prerogativ

But then there is m
than just that. The war o
most other things it has
passage of time. Time w

Bridegroom's tale

EVEN in this day and age one hears from time to time of men marrying long after they have outlived the biblical span of life of three score and ten years. An octogenarian judge of the United States Supreme Court not only did that but took a bride almost quarter his age and fathered a child. India has witnessed such alliances ever since the virtuous satyayuga and a Sanskrit proverb, which has seen much service, refers to an old man's young bride. If instances of the latter have become fewer in recent years, so have men like Mr. Bakusha Dewan of Bangladesh who has just taken his 138th wife at the age of 89.

One does not know the age of Mr. Dewan's latest bride no
-bit proverb, which connotes a mismatch in
d wife, applies in this case. But he ca
se in the Guinness Book of Records whic
gloto with the largest number of wives -
eat cannot match those of the monarchs o
included thousands of wives and women o
s. But then he can argue that times are no
ucha did not have to contend with democra
s of the liberation movement. As it is, th
Rights Commission has taken a rather di
thing and pointed out that polygamy, th
ocities on women, must stop. According t
Ittefaq, the commission has also suggeste
compulsory registration of marriages, the fixin

Big Sister Is Watching ..

The gallant French may proclaim *'Vive la difference'* when it comes to their men and women, but the British have just decided to have none of it. British experts have decided to tackle the problem of inequality from the school level itself. Schools in that country have been sent a massive, 268-page book called *Genderwatch* which spells out in precise detail how the merits of sexual equality are to be impressed on formative minds. The book is jointly

Admit: the eligible bachelor

New York City, which had run out of funds to run its services barely a few years ago, is now faced with a different kind of scarcity. It is running short of eligible bachelors. A survey-based study conducted jointly by a Yale University sociologist and a Harvard economist indicates that a larger number of single women spend their time alone in New York than ever before. It notes that single women above the age of 35

La Dolce Vita

Time was when the Congress election machine could say "Even if we put up a lamp-post as a candidate, it will win the election". Things are different now, though uncharitable critics say this explains why we see in our politics so many veritable lamp-posts. The point, surely, is that in a democracy, it is the people's choice which counts.
of television, especially in the West,

'Third Edits': Mocking the Feminist Movement

Topics like wages for housework or high bride price in the Gulf countries are meat and drink to these edit writers. Needless to say, the same papers also have edits disapproving of dowry deaths and female foeticide and hailing landmark judgements.

One can often recognise, as soon as one sees a "freak" item on women — the kind that is invariably boxed and put in bold type and often topped by a snide heading — that this item will reappear a few days later in the form of a third edit in one or several of the newspapers. It will have a typical "witty" style, full of puns and references to women's lib, the libbers, bra-burners, and saying things like "feminists may not like it but"... etc, etc.

Some recent items which very predictably inspired third edits:

** An Italian actress winning an election with a strip-tease campaign and the slogan "down with atomic energy, up with sexual energy". ('La Dolca Vita', *Times of India*, June 19, 1987)

** A US study which found that many qualified women are remaining single for want of eligible partners. ('Admit: the eligible bachelor', *Hindustan Times*, June 9, 1987).

** Minister Margaret Alva taking the Lok Sabha to task for its flippant attitude to questions concerning women. ('In Defence of Women', *Hindustan Times*, April 11, 1987.) My reaction on reading it was to note that it contains nearly all the cliches alphabetically from A for Adam, B for bra-burning, C for chivalry and E for eve to S for sex war and W for women's lib.

** A British study which showed that Marilyn Monroe did have a "fairly good intellect". ('Not a Dumb Blonde', *Times of India*, May 14, 1987.)

** An item on a Bangladeshi man who married his 118th wife at the age of 80 ('Bridegroom's Tale', *Indian Express* July 22, 1986, with one dig at *Manushi* and another at the "viragoes of the liberation movement".

** A move by Britain's Equal Opportunities Commission to tackle sexism in school textbooks ('Big sister is watching', *Times of India*, February 3, 1987.)

Attitudes of Media Persons

"The international press asked many snide questions about women's lib in India. Smita answered them all with spirit, dignity and intelligence." (Amita Malik on Smita Patil, *Mainstream*, December 20, 1986)[1]

That the press is hostile to "women's lib" is obvious. The hostility is implicit in items like 'Do you beat your wife?' in Khuswant Singh's gossip column in *Sunday* (June 19, 1983). It is manifested in the use of unnecessary exclamation marks to punctuate headings for serious incidents, like: 'Another Dowry Death in City!' (*Deccan Chronicle*, January 29, 1987); or 'Killing Women the Amniocentesis way!' (*Newstime*, April 17, 1986)

A "humourist" like Rajinder Puri exhibits it when he takes off in distastefully "light" vein, in his syndicated column, 'Last Word', on such grave issues like the Shah Bano verdict and the question of maintenance to divorced wives. In his piece 'One Woman' (*Newstime* March 5, 1986) he describes Shah Bano as the woman who has given a headache to many people including her former husband. And in 'Maintenance of Wives' (*Newstime* March 26, 1986) he calls for a focus on the rights of men whose money is being squandered by wives whom they have not even divorced.

Sub-editors in the *Times of India* find a regular outlet for displaying this attitude in the 'News-in-brief' column which contains snippets from foreign and national news. 'You have a long way to go baby' is the heading for an EEC study which showed that Danish and British couples are more egalitarian in the sharing of domestic roles than couples in West Germany. (*Times of India*, July 25, 1987) This was in the Delhi edition. The Bombay edition had a more straightforward heading 'Europeans on Feminism', which is inaccurate though not snide. What the heading ought to have been was: 'Europeans differ on sex roles'.

It's Always a Joke

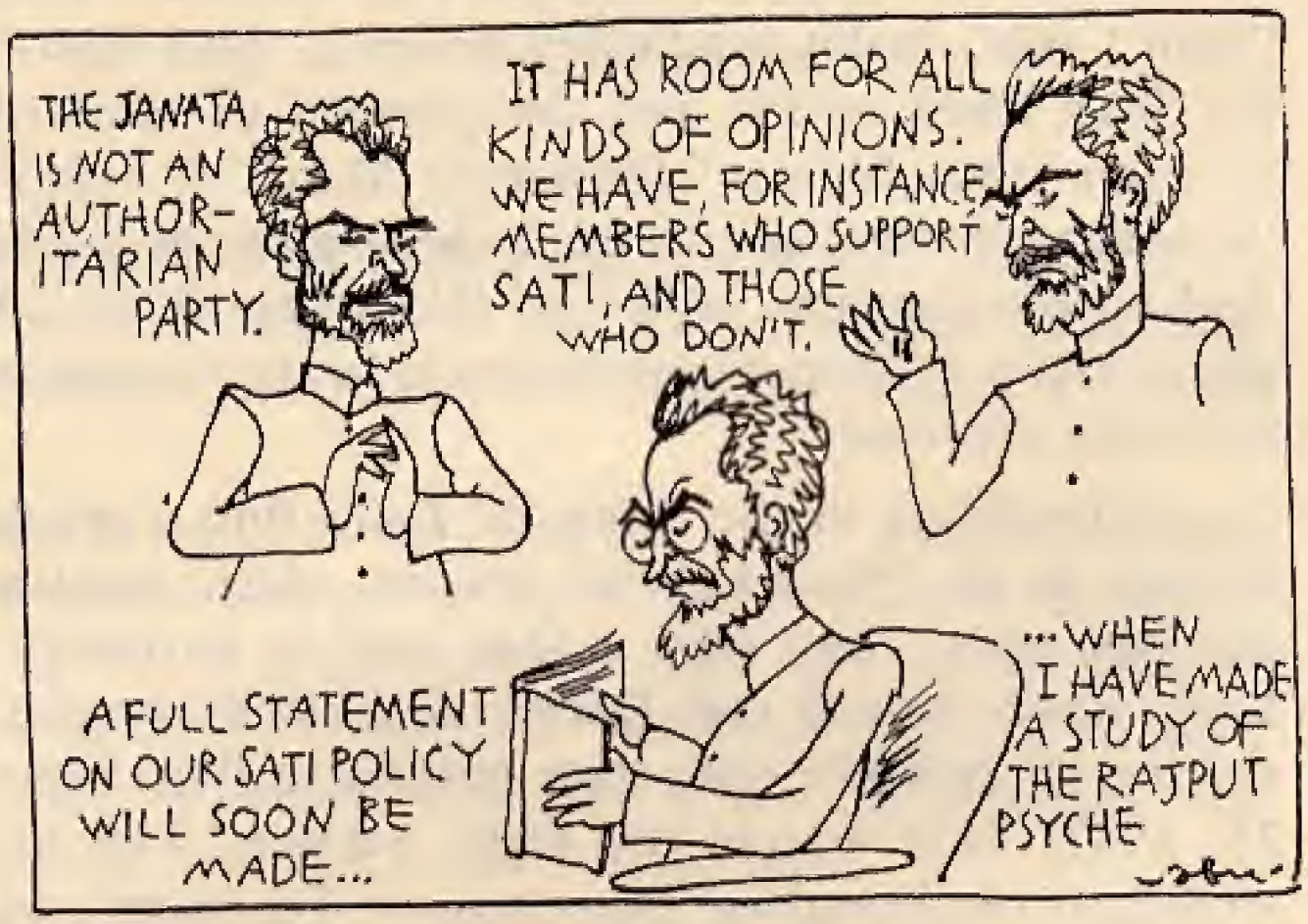
An article on the new Bill to prevent indecent portrayal of women in the media refers to the way the media makes light of the issue.[2] When a street play was being enacted to mobilise support for a women's rally against indecent representation and sexual harassment, a reporter was heard asking for a photo of the play saying "I'll caption it 'strip-tease in Connaught place'."

The old joke about mothers-in-law, imported from the West, frequently crops up in our media though mothers living with their daughters is rare in our milieu and even when they do they are most unlikely to be dominating over their sons-in-law. Indeed the shoe is really on the other foot, as the media itself known only too well with its stream of reports on harassment of brides.

Media's use of "humour" in subverting the women's question is a graphic illustration of the fact that the values of media persons are reflected in media output.

Tailpiece: A word on satire

It should be acknowledged that sexist and anti-feminist humour is one thing, while satire is quite another. Some years ago, an article in *Seminar* (August 1984) described the media's trivialisation of the women's question.[3] One of the examples cited by the author was a cartoon by Abu Abraham, a sarcastic comment on the Delhi High Court's acquittal of the accused husband in the Sudha Goel dowry murder case. In Abu's rejoinder to the accusation (in his column in *Debonair* September 1984) he made the point that through the ages cartoons have been using satire as a tool for social comment and to draw attention to injustices of different kinds. Though I agree with many of the points about satire in the *Seminar* article, I feel that Abu's point is valid. In fact this question— when is a visual a pointed social comment and when is it simply poking fun — is a tricky one and has been raised in the context of visuals used in the feminist media. (See chapter 'A Look Inwards'.)



Satire or Sexist Humour?

Take the recent cartoons on the topic of sati after the September 1987 incident in Rajasthan. Personally, I am not sure if any of these could be described as trivialising the issue, and some of them do appear to use satire as a weapon to draw attention to the reality of women's situation. And yet, it is possible that some readers may regard them as insensitive or offensive. Some of the cartoons are on the borderline and it is difficult to judge.

But that said there is no denying that blatant sexist humour, sarcastic digs at the movement and trivialising the language and visuals are media's favourite tools for subversion— subversion of the same issues which are also taken up for serious discussion in feature articles and other columns.

References and Notes

1. This article, written in tribute to actress Smita Patil after her death in December 1986, was first published in the *Statesman* and reproduced by *Mainstream*.
2. 'Selling Sexism' by Meenakshi Subramaniam, *Surya India* January, 1987.
3. 'Struggling for Space' by Sujata Madhok, *Seminar* issue on 'The Sexist Media', August 1984.

Greer is Good Copy
How News Values Operate

Preceding chapters in this section reflect in a general way how the values of media persons determine media's treatment of the women's question. This chapter looks at the specific manner in which *news values* result in the media presenting a skewed picture.

Women Who Have Made It

Like the Sunday magazine series in *Newstime* on 'Women Bosses', during 1986-87, a fair amount of the enhanced coverage on women is devoted to the women-can-make-it-to-the-top formula. The ingredients are usually: a scientist, a judge, an IAS officer, and perhaps a glamorous ad agency chief executive thrown in for good measure.

There are two problems with this approach. One, attention is shifted from the social system while propagating the women-too-can-succeed message. And two, when such interviews become the staple of the women's pages and women's magazines they result in belittling women's achievements. Besides, most of the time these interviews are superficial and lack the perspective which could make them meaningful.

At one time, the *Indian Express* 'Women's Page' used to have a regular stream of interviews with women in different walks of life who, I suspect, may not have particularly relished having their professional accomplishments being labelled

as "women's" achievements. Certainly the sportswomen and athletes who were featured on this page must have preferred to have their profiles and achievements placed on the sports page rather than the women's page.

Playing Up Feminist Celebrities

News values tend to subvert the movement particularly in the way feminist "heroines" are played up. While feminist analysis of issues are low priority for writing about, feminist celebrities are not. Germaine Greer is good copy, as is her sex life, especially for the Khushwant Singhs of the media. Gloria Steinem writing on Marilyn Monroe is "news" and much mileage can be got from the feminist-writes-on-sex-bomb formula.

In *Sunday's* 'Gossip' column (February 22, 1986) Khushwant Singh writes of Germaine Greer: "Amongst the celebrities who graced the recently concluded seminar on Indira Gandhi was the feminist Germaine Greer. She attracted more publicity than the more eminent seminarists because despite being in the mid-forties she remains a remarkably attractive young woman. Her looks and her books are better known than her private life..." And then he goes on to share with his readers some trivia about Ms.Greer's marriage to a male model who had once posed nude for the *Cosmopolitan* centre-fold.

This visit of Germaine Greer to India in 1986 inevitably sparked write-ups on her in all the newspapers, including the tradition-bound *Hindu*, all with an eye on the sensation-value. Only a few profiles by woman journalists had any depth and did justice to their subject.

Writing about feminist celebrities also gives the media a chance to take a dig at the movement as a whole. *Illustrated Weekly* editor Pritish Nandy commenting on Greer's book, *The Mad Woman's Underclothes* (1987) in his 'Editor's Choice' column (May 10, 1987) suggests that women too might enjoy it if "they were willing to trim their nails and sheathe their fangs". In 1984, both the *Weekly* and *Sunday* reproduced selected chunks from Greer's *Sex and Destiny*, the *Weekly* using visuals and quotes conveying a distorted overall picture. Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan are both often quoted out-of-context by the media as evidence of a "retraction" by the most feminist of them all.

What is Newsworthy?

At a Caribbean workshop on women and communication, it was pointed out that media should re-define its concept of what is newsworthy.[1] "Too often it is 'who' is involved in a particular activity which determines whether or not the media considers that activity worthy of coverage. Participants cited the instance of the communications seminar itself where preferential coverage was given to the wife of the Prime Minister, Mrs.Michael Manley, who opened the conference, but not to the two main speakers. Workshop participants also felt that the media ignored the ordinary person as 'newsmaker' until that person was involved in a crisis situation."

Media and Women's Groups

A detailed account of the experiences of women's groups with the media follows in the section 'Face to Face'. Here it is relevant to point to the attitude of newspapers to women's groups as "sources" of news.

While some papers consider the activities of these groups as newsworthy and also utilise the latter's press releases on issues and events, others have adopted a hard and negative attitude. An activist group in Hyderabad says that all the local dailies except the *Hindu* have been publishing their press releases.[2] A group which investigates dowry deaths in the city has noted that the *Hindu* has not published any of their press notes, not even when they gave a petition to the Chief Minister calling for the setting up of a dowry cell — an event which got coverage not only in other local dailies but also in some of the nationally circulated magazines.

In 1984, after this group had staged demonstrations protesting against a series of bride killing incidents, they gave a memorandum to the Police Commissioner, demanding speedy action. Faced with so much adverse publicity, the police department responded with a press note to the effect that the cases mentioned would be investigated. Interestingly *this* press note got due space in the *Hindu* which, however, did not think it necessary to give coverage to the demonstration and memo submitted by the women's group which were instrumental in extracting the commitment from the police chief!

Basically the *Hindu* relies on establishment sources for news and gives scant coverage to activist groups in general and women's groups in particular. It also exhibits a preference for foreign write-ups on women's issues — sometimes carrying

There are facts and facts

All media texts are the outcome of a multitude of choices, many of which are made so naturally and spontaneously that they are sometimes hardly recognised, even by those who make them, as active choices at all. If we can recognise, with American critic David Altheide, that "almost anything could be said about any event," then we should ask of any media text, why this or that way of treating it was chosen, and whose interests are served by amplifying through reportage, its significance. Are there any events which might have provided a different perspective? What is of the utmost importance here, and constitutes a significant early step towards media literacy, is the insight that the act of selection is itself *evaluative*. The media marks particular people and events as more significant than others simply by reporting them. For, "what is noted," to repeat an earlier observation of Barthes, "is by definition notable". The media therefore carry out what is perhaps their most ideological role through a process which is generally regarded as being ideologically innocent, the process of reporting "the facts".

— extracted from *Mainstream*, 1985

this to ludicrous lengths. In 1982, I remember, when women's groups all over the country were celebrating March 8 with much vigour and enthusiasm, there was not a word of reportage on these events in the *Hindu*. The paper however carried a two-inch item on how March 8 was celebrated in France!

Counter-productive

Altogether one finds that media's preference for sensational events and for colourful personalities, plus its misgivings about women's groups, add up in such a way as to be counter-productive to the aims and efforts of the women's movement. News values function to: black out certain kinds of information while playing up other kinds; distort the reality of women's lives by focusing mainly on women who are prominent or controversial; give a false picture of what the movement is about by concentrating on personalities rather than principles; regard issues as newsworthy only when they have sensation value. This last is seen in the high volume of reportage on atrocity incidents, with special preference for sexual atrocities in the form of rape and prostitution.

Media sociology has phrases like "gate-keeping", "agenda-setting", and "filtering role" to explain how media persons choose or reject topics on the basis of news values. The phenomenon operates in the media's treatment of all issues, not just the women's question, and operates to propagate the dominant values of the establishment. It is part of the media's way of creating what is described as a "constructed reality" rather than providing an accurate "mirror to reality" — though the common perception, or rather, misconception, about the media is that it truthfully reflects a total reality.

References and Notes

1. *Caribbean Women in Communication for Development: Report of a Workshop*, 1975.

2. Interestingly, the *Hindu* gives ready space to press releases on the activities of establishment women's organisations like, for example, the Railway Officers' Wives' Organisation, whose cultural and social programmes get publicity not at all commensurate with their importance.

IV

FACE TO FACE
Interaction Between the Media and the Movement

Conflict and co-operation; hostility and sympathy. This section takes a look at the many facets of the media's relationship with the women's movement: The experiences of activists in using the media, and in critiquing the sexist content of media. Establishment reactions to such criticism. How media women are contributing to the cause. Their relationship with activists. And also, the role of the feminist media in meeting the needs of the movement.

Blow Hot Blow Cold
Mixed experiences of Activist Groups with the Media

In a variety of ways activist women's groups are trying to use the print media as an instrument to further their cause. Some contribute articles to raise awareness about general issues and particular events. Reportage on some of their activities being an effective way to draw public attention to women's issues, activist groups seek coverage for events and also issue their own press releases. They have found that media's attention can be both helpful and counter-productive to the movement.

Now recognised as being "newsworthy", many women's issues and events do get ready coverage. But media is also used, by those who oppose the movement, to propagate negative images. When such opposition comes from people within

the media, who naturally have ready access to media space, dealing with it becomes problematic.

Narrating their experience with the print media in their respective cities, five women's groups present some observations which reflect the points of conflict and co-operation between the media and the movement.[1] A common thread runs through their descriptions of media attitudes — ranging from positive and sympathetic coverage, to non-coverage, to distortion and hostility.

A Hunger for Sensation

Saheli of New Delhi has been using the media for about six years to: publicise issues; highlight the problems of individual women who approach their centre for help; and as a means of protecting the group, or women seeking its help, in cases and events where publicity can help reduce vulnerability.

On its own, the media has approached Saheli to: write about its activities, seek information and views on issues which the reporter wants to write about: and "sometimes with the specific purpose of maligning us to even their own score against the women's movement".

Saheli reports mixed experiences with the media:

"The reportage has varied greatly — on the one extreme are articles which agitate us enough for us to want to complain to the Press Council and file defamation cases; on the other hand we have also received fair and objective coverage. From this experience we feel we are in a position to generalise on some points:

** Most journalists seek sensational stories. Even when facts and figures are discussed with them and a holistic account given, they choose to highlight only those aspects which they consider sensational.

** A particular newspaper's broad policy, vis-a-vis its attitude towards the government, and not the importance of the specific issue, determines the extent of coverage we receive.

For example, one national daily, which was then adopting an anti-government stance, failed to send a reporter to cover the March 8 celebrations organised jointly by several women's groups. However, they sent one to cover the Congress-I sponsored event for March 8. At the end of the day they rang up one of our members and got all the details of our programme. The next day we saw a big splash in that paper about our event which went to the extent of praising a street play (which even we knew was bad) just because they had made up their mind to run down all that happened at the function where Mrs. Gandhi gave a speech.

** Letters to the editor are screened too much and only those published which, by and large, support the stand taken by the editor. For example, after a recent article against Saheli, a lot of people who knew us told us that they had written to the newspaper concerned. But the only letters which got published were those expressing views against women's organisations.

** We have had very bad experiences with some journalists who are intent on writing negatively about us. If we tell them we are intending to participate in the end-of-the-Decade conference, because it is a unique opportunity, they write

that Saheli is full of people who want to be part of the jet-set crowd! If we tell them what issues we are working on, they write about what we are *not* doing, forgetting what we *are* doing.

In one instance, Saheli had taken up a death case and the suspected murderer had close links with a national newspaper and magazine group. They sent a reporter over who wrote total falsehoods about us. When we sent a rejoinder it was published but alongside the editor felt free to print his own derogatory comments.

As a small group we find ourselves helpless to go on dealing with such cases in court or with the Press Council.

** Most journalists seem very keen to project individual leaders and want to quote names and print photographs of individuals. For a non-hierarchical organisation like ours, which has no one leader, and has no desire to play up personalities, it causes a lot of problems.

** Many journalists don't have the patience to listen or read anything handed to them. They want even the most complex matters explained to them in five spoken sentences.

** Media people who come to cover an event don't stay long enough to know at first hand what is going on, and start looking for a press release as soon as they come. In fact, last year on International Women's Day, someone suggested that we prepare a press release a whole day in advance so that it could be handed out as soon as the journalists arrived on the scene. This meant describing the event even before it had taken place. Some of us objected, and made a realistic press release towards the end of the event. This was cyclostyled and ready for distribution before the cultural programme was over. Needless to say, by that time there was not a single journalist on the scene.

** Journalists are used to getting free handouts, refreshments, etc. We, on the other hand, try to recover at least the cost of the material. At a recent seminar we were charging Rs. 10 for the material and Rs. 10 towards the cost of food, hall, tea, etc. A few journalists just refused to pay and gave us veiled threats of writing adverse reports or not reporting at all unless we were willing to oblige.

** We have found that journalists are usually reluctant to confirm any statements and will use the word "alleged" even when documentary evidence is supplied. They are content to write "Saheli says such and such" even when the facts are indisputable. Claiming to be objective, some of them will write any nonsense they feel like writing — and when questioned, tell us that they are quite willing to publish our side of the story also. From their attitude it seems that the harm done is no more than can be remedied by a letter to the editor.

One such journalist wrote an article about Saheli after talking to some people who were anti-us. A few months later she walked into our office to interview us about another matter. We refused to give an interview unless she first clarified the issue of the earlier article. Without telling us she started taping the conversation and when we realised what was happening we asked her to erase the recording. She went back to her office and complained about us to the editor.

** Our good experiences have been with journalists who are either sympathetic to the movement or, as individuals, are a part of it.

Women journalists, unless they are part of the movement, are more cynical than male journalists. By and large, women journalists are more critical of whatever is being done, many believe that women's liberation is a non-issue and are quite unsympathetic in their writing."

Commitment and Perspective

SEWA of Ahmedabad (Self-Employed Women's Association) organises poor women on issues related to work and minimum wages, towards unionising and forming co-operatives.

This group doesn't usually volunteer to write articles for the general media unless specifically requested to do so by editors or other media people. "And usually the article is printed as it is."

SEWA's impression too is that by and large women's issues are not of much interest to newspapers except for atrocity stories on rape, prostitution, sexual harassment, etc.

Positive coverage is attributed by this group mainly to the presence of women journalists, as well as some male journalists who are interested in writing on women's issues and issues of the poor. "They have the correct perspectives and they are also able to convey that perspective to readers (and sometimes to their colleagues). Sometimes we get sympathetic coverage from the press because we know a journalist personally."

Negative coverage has stemmed from journalists who are close to people who are anti-SEWA, "or who themselves feel they have been 'slighted' by us".

The local Gujarati press has also been hostile. "The Gujarati paper with the widest circulation has consistently been either boycotting our news or printing anti-SEWA news." This particular paper is described as having been "openly anti-poor, anti-dalit, anti-minority, anti-women and in that context anti-SEWA too".

SEWA has found media coverage of demonstrations generally poor because the issues which they take up — minimum wages for garment workers or hawking space for vendors — are regarded by journalists as "not very interesting".

"Some journalists have even said: 'Why don't you take up issues like rape or obscene posters? Then we will give you a lot of coverage.' "

"We get good coverage in special articles where a media person comes and researches some aspect of our work in detail." SEWA's president, Ela Bhatt, is another reason for media's interest in this organisation's activities. Having won the Magsaysay award, the Right Livelihood award, as well as the Padma Bhushan, and being a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha, the media's focus on her naturally extends to the activities of her organisation.

Women-News is No News?

In Calcutta, a joint forum, the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha, says: "It is rare to find editors (male or female) who are receptive to writings on women's issues with a feminist angle." If material contributed to the media by the group

is "too strident" in tone, it gets, "modified" and made "milder". This group too reports mixed experiences with the media regarding coverage for activities as well as the group's attempts to focus on women's issues in the media.

"There was general rejoicing this year when the photograph of the March 8 programme appeared on the front page. It is rare to have such prominence." News items on women's issues tend to get cut and pushed to the bottom of an inside page. Reporters are not automatically sent to cover women-events unless politically and socially prominent women are participating. Often publication of news on women's groups' activities depends on the level of connections with the Press.

Media coverage of seminars and demonstrations is felt to be "rather unsatisfactory", the news often being clipped down to a bald statement minus the resolutions etc. "Very seldom are the press releases prepared by women's groups put to use in the case of expressing a stand or protest against an issue unless it has political ramifications."

Women-news appears to attract the media when some political slant can be given to it. "For example, the forum's 12-hour sit-in fast against the West Bengal government over the illegal detention of non-criminal women in jails for safe custody was given good coverage because it was the first protest after the Left-Front's thumping election victory in the 1987 Assembly elections. The question of highlighting the government's embarrassment was more important than the inhumanness of the women's plight."

Issues, which women's groups feel need writing about, get coverage depending on the attitude of key media people. "For example, the issue of maternity benefits for unmarried mothers was seen by the editor of an English daily as one of 'morals' and he was not in favour of anything being written in support of it."

The Calcutta forum finds that headings are often inappropriate, inaccurate or trivialising. Their black flag demonstration against the Prime Minister during his visit to Calcutta, protesting against the Muslim Women's Bill, was frivolously headlined by one Bengali daily as the protest of "five Muslim wives". Another daily reported it as a protest by Muslim women — which was factually incorrect since the forum is a secular group. "Most of the papers did not bother to check the facts before publishing. Only one English daily carried the correct news because they used the press release given by the group."

In another instance, the attempted rape of a nurse by a class-IV employee in a hospital compound was jocularly reported by a Bengali paper as "advances repulsed". The protests of women's groups against this language were not published.

"Usually a women's group has to depend on the sympathetic attitude of the news editor for ensuring good coverage and placement — which is not a reliable way of measuring the need of readers to know about changes and developments in the women's movement. Our experiences of negative coverage as well as non-coverage due to an anti-feminist attitude are too many to enumerate here."

Conservative Backlash

Chingari, an activist group in Ahmedabad, finds that media attitudes can be arbitrary as well as contradictory. They too report mixed experiences, both

positive and negative, in their interactions with the media. In their view, again, March 8 rallies and campaigns against dowry deaths and rape get good coverage. But issues like economic demands tend to get ignored by the media.

"One member had written about the plight of Muslim women in rehabilitation camps soon after the 1986 riots. Chingari had visited the camps as well as the homes of the victims which had been looted, and where their means of livelihood, mainly sewing machines, had been burnt." This article, submitted to the local editor of a national daily for the weekly column on local events, was not published. No reason was given and the group's assumption is that their piece was too radical. On the other hand, a more general article by a Chingari member on the women's movement in Gujarat was published by the same paper without deletion.

This group has written for the women's pages of local Gujarati dailies but finds that the regional press is "very conservative" and is responsive only to some women's issues which might be described as "safe".

However, "In one case of bride-burning, all women's organisations had collectively demonstrated in front of a police station and led a morcha to the in-laws' house. Chingari had put up a play. All these got wide publicity even in the most conservative Gujarati papers.

"One paper, which has a high circulation, published photographs of the play but also carried a cartoon which was very derogatory and reflected the paper's conservative attitude."

The paper quoted well-known literary figures to show that "women are their own enemies". The demonstrators' statement that it was not suicide but murder was put in quotes and the cartoonist's comment was that women should first learn to do justice to each other — beginning from sister-in-law and mother-in-law, since the police enter the scene only much later. The thrust of the paper's attitude was: don't blame the police when you have only yourselves to blame.

Chingari's experience is that press releases get published when a sympathetic reporter is contacted, and in this matter one national daily has been consistently receptive.

"This is the only newspaper here which has women among its reporters and all of them have been sympathetic. Despite the fact that one member of our group is herself a journalist and has often personally delivered press notes, many newspapers have not printed them, except for this paper which, however, does not have a high circulation in Gujarat. However, certain news items, like Chingari's support to struggles of women in their economic demands have been turned down even by this paper."

This group gives an example which reflects the way in which the media is tied up with other vested interests in the establishment and how this gets compounded by a lack of commitment to causes among media personnel.

"About 250 women, most of them belonging to scheduled and backward castes, and Muslims, were retrenched from a co-operative ginning factory in Idar, 200 kms. from Ahmedabad. Some local social workers had informed Chingari and wanted support. We went there and talked to the social workers, the retrenched women and also the hostile management. This matter needed publicity. So we approached all the newspapers with a brief report. All the newspapers politely

accepted it. But the acting chief reporter of a national daily categorically stated that it was not the job of a newspaper to publish something just to help people."

When the group later mentioned this to a woman journalist on this paper, who was on leave at that time, she regretted very much that she had not been there at that time to "push" for the publication of the report.

Chingari points out that even her enthusiasm may not have helped because this particular incident was complicated by the involvement of powerful economic interests and certain political parties. Although some papers later published a small item on the incident, many of them put out a biased and one-sided account and the group feels that they were bribed to do so.

Interestingly, the Space Application Centre covered the issue in their local TV programme, but the management of the affected factory used its influence to coerce the Gujarat Electricity Board to shut off power for one hour in Idar when the programme was telecast.

Another comment from Chingari highlights the contradictory attitudes of the media. As mentioned earlier, one national daily which has sympathetic women reporters has given positive coverage to demonstrations and rallies. This sometimes get nullified later by comments made by male editorial staff in the columns of the same paper.

For example, the 1986 Women's Day celebration was well reported in this paper, with an appropriate heading: 'Sparks, not flowers' taken from the slogan 'Hum Bharat Ki Nari Hain. Phool Nahin, Chingari Hain' (We are the women of India, not flowers but fiery sparks.)

For three subsequent Mondays after this, the male editorial staff of the same paper attacked the entire concept in the 'City Notebook' column, totally negating the spirit of the earlier news report. The gist of the tirade was: women who take to the streets and prefer to be sparks, not flowers, will burn up society, destroy family peace, etc. When a few letters from readers protested against this attitude, it only provided scope for more copy criticising the women's movement.

Chingari points out that staffers contributing to this column get paid a paltry sum for each piece. And to earn this they made the paper create an extremely negative picture of a progressive movement.

Media's hostility when manifested like this has proved problematic and Chingari expresses a dilemma as to how to respond in such situations especially when they keep cropping up. For example, one Gujarati women's magazine published an interview with a Dalit poet and among other things his views on the women's movement were sought. According to Chingari, this man is known for his anti-feminist views and in the interview he had made some allegations against the group. However, when the interviewer approached Chingari members to give their views, the group decided it was pointless to enter into a slanging match.

One last comment from Chingari is also noteworthy. When a journalist from a national daily was asked why his paper did not report the March 8 rally, his excuse was that the group did not spend enough time explaining to him all about the event and its implications. Chingari's question is: "Why should we be expected to go and personally hand over press notes and additionally to stop and talk to reporters in every newspaper to get coverage which ought to be automatic for

a newsworthy event? Would the same thing be expected from other groups and political parties which stage rallies?" (Shiv Sena and other communalist rallies have no problems in getting extensive coverage!)

"Contacts" Help

A member of the Bombay Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), who herself does a lot of writing in the popular media and is also involved in women's studies, says: "The Forum does use media a lot, but not as an organisation. Individual members take upon themselves the task of writing and use their contacts to get the pieces published. In general, we think that the English press rather than the regional has been more responsive. Of course they delete/reject articles, make fun of us. There is often a tension between activists and women journalists, each feeling she is being 'used' by the other. On the whole, placement of feminist stuff depends on individual contacts."[2]

During the December 1985 conference in Bombay of activist groups from different parts of the country, a workshop on communications was organised to discuss different aspects of the movement's interaction with media. The Forum's report (FAOW-a, 1985) on the workshop says:

"With a few individual exceptions, the English language press has projected the movement as militant and activist. A few individual journalists have misrepresented the facts, acted patronising and highhanded and expected activists to supply sensational details about the women they were helping. One article counterposed the Women's centre and the Forum, suggesting that the failure of the Forum to tackle individual cases had led to the formation of the Centre. Then again, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* carried an article saying that a film actress was running a women's centre in a slum, and had sunk her money and energies in it. Since we have been present on the occasions when this actress, who is a sympathiser, has been interviewed, and have seen her misquoted, we do not blame her at all but only want to illustrate how carelessly the press treats the facts.

"One woman editor, believing that feminists want publicity at any cost, wanted activists to go and meet her in her office! However, one decent and well-researched article in *Bombay* magazine on the Women's Centre needs special mention. Though the writer was initially received with suspicion, she persisted in her efforts to collect material, paid several visits to the centre and wrote a balanced piece."

Reasons for Negative Attitudes

Activist groups using the media are unanimous in attributing positive coverage to the presence of media persons who are supportive of the progressive aims of the women's movement. Their perceptions of the reasons for negative coverage vary.

** **Ownership:** Saheli feels it is a question of who owns the media. "It is clear that the mainstream media is owned by capitalist-patriarchal interests by and large. They have an anti-feminist attitude and cover some women's issues depending on whether these seem apolitical or not. Also, depending on their own stance — pro or anti-government — they deal with news accordingly. One daily

which has been ignoring us systematically for almost six years has suddenly started giving us coverage. At times, the press misuses its power and writes negatively about us just because we did not offer enough hospitality."

** **Low priority:** The Calcutta forum's impression is that news on women's issues has low priority in the media's scale of values, which explains why such news often gets hacked or tucked away in a barely visible corner. Media controllers' perception of readers' expectations and wants, and "deep-rooted patriarchy of those in charge" are some explanations cited by this group for media attitudes to the women's question. This is compounded by the "consumerist culture" which results in greater attention being given to topics which are the traditional staples of women's magazines. And when feminist ideas do get coverage it is because "now feminism is the fashion".

** **Conservative nature:** Chingari too feels that media covers women's issues because it is the done thing now and may help boost circulation. At the same time, the conservative attitudes of media people result in selective coverage of issues as well as antagonism towards the radical face of the movement. The media is hostile because of a belief that feminism threatens the fabric of society and its dominant values. The group has found the regional press to be ultra-conservative and therefore even more opposed to the values which the activists stand for.

A similar view is expressed by SEWA about the regional press, whose anti-women's groups attitude needs to be seen as part of a general anti-progressive outlook.

Stereotyped Vision

It is interesting to note that over a period of time media persons develop their own stereotyped vision of what sort of actions women's group "ought" to take.

For example, one notices that a group like SEWA generally gets a good press, especially in the national dailies which have published sympathetic accounts of their activities among poor women. This is partly because of the national and international standing of Ela Bhatt but I feel that it is also because SEWA has an image of taking up "developmental" rather than "ideologically feminist" actions, and is therefore perceived as being "different" from other activist groups.

And yet, when SEWA finds it necessary to resort to "protest" actions in certain situations, the causes they take up seem to fall short of the "news value" criteria of media people!

Having acquired a perception that "newsworthy" activism has to be against the starker types of atrocities, the media gives ready coverage of groups protesting against dowry deaths and rape. Media persons' distorted understanding of the women's question determines not only whether coverage of feminist actions will be negative or positive but also whether there will be any coverage at all.

References and Notes

1. The first four sets of observations are responses to my questionnaire.
2. Personal communication from Nandita Gandhi of FAOW, Bombay.

The Watchdogs
Women Monitor the Media

A few media-monitoring groups have critiqued sexism and obscenity in cinema, television and the print media, they have organised some protests and achieved some results. On the whole, their actions have been sporadic rather than sustained but the efforts of these groups are important and praiseworthy. Their work falls in two categories: one, general critiques in the form of reports, seminar papers and feature articles; and two, direct protests against specific instances of sexism and obscenity.

Activist women's groups not engaged primarily in media-monitoring have, at different points of time, voiced protests against pornographic films, vulgar hoardings and obscene advertisements. In 1985, a dramatic and spontaneous campaign was launched against actress Simi's Sunday-morning television serial, *Women's World*, which was hurriedly taken off in response to an orchestrated protest by women's groups in different parts of the country.

Examples of sexist advertisements by readers to *Eve's Weekly's* 'On Record' column show that some consciousness is emerging among the public too. However, it is one thing to recognise that an image is sexist or obscene and quite another to do something about it.

Considering that the few media-monitoring groups in existence cannot by themselves sustain an endless campaign against every bit of sexism that keeps coming up in the media, some thought is needed on how to draw more people from the public and from activist groups in general to take up the watchdog activity required. For this, some guidance is necessary on how to protest and to whom, so that effective action is taken rather than diffused general criticism.

Pointers from a British Group

Some of the activities of the London-based Women's Media Action Group offer useful pointers to what could be done here too.[1] This British group brings out a bi-monthly newsletter in which it publishes examples of reportage and advertisements which its network has criticised. (This has the added advantage of generating adverse publicity for the media and advertisers concerned.) The newsletter reproduces the text of protest letters sent by different people as well as the replies, if any, from advertisers and the media. Readers also share their ideas on novel and effective ways of protesting.

The group's leaflet, *How to Complain About Sexism in the Media*, gives tips on whom to send protests to (depending on whether the offensive material is in print or comes over radio/TV etc.), with copies to whom, and how to word such letters. For example, the leaflet stresses the importance of being specific — which ad, where it appeared, when, etc., and precisely why it is offensive.

The group's experience shows that if lots of people write in and protest, the authorities are compelled to examine the issue. Sometimes a heavily criticised ad does not appear again.

In 1986, the London group drew up a 'Code of Practice for Non-Sexist Advertising' which was submitted to the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK. It also organises talks and slide-tape shows to spread consciousness about sexism and has helped formulate courses on this topic for school and college students as well as trade unions and other groups.

Initiatives in India

An overview of the activities of media monitoring groups in India may stimulate similar initiatives by other feminist groups.

In Delhi a Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media was set up in 1983 by women from different walks of life.[2] As a group, and as individuals, its members have written articles in the mass media, criticising sexism and stereotyping particularly in advertising. Though some of the advertisements which were strongly

Women Against Sexism

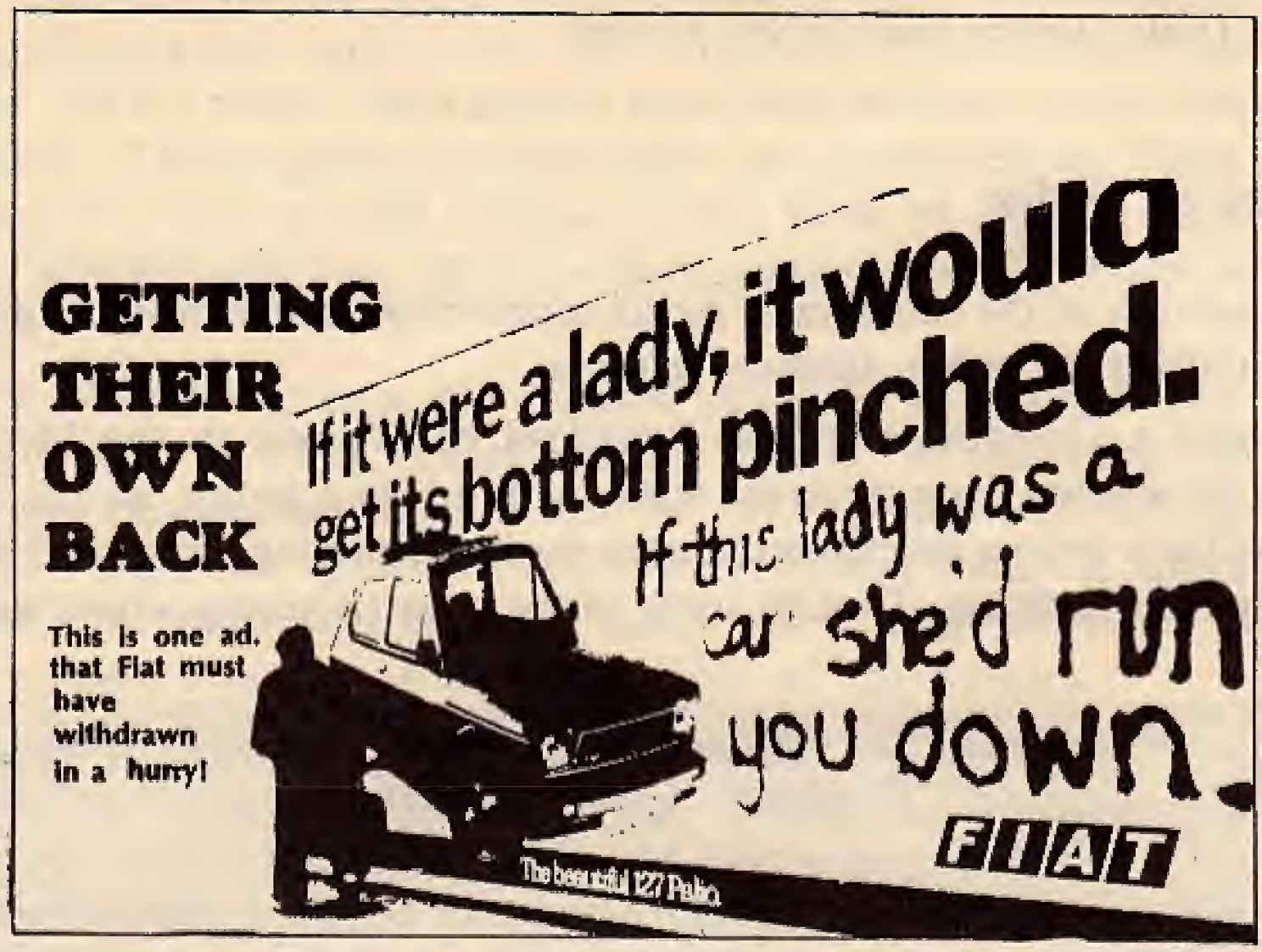
Inducting women, whether they are activists or not, into media-monitoring activity helps in spreading critical awareness about sexism in images, and groups in different parts of the world are trying to involve the public in such work. Margaret Gallagher mentions that groups in the US have been particularly effective in this respect. Listing the many national and international organisations which have initiated different kinds of programmes, she describes the varying degrees of success they have had in their campaigns. (Gallagher 1981). Some examples:

** The Sri Lankan women's organisation Kanta Handa (Voice of Women) has, since its inception in 1978, conducted a campaign against sexist advertising. The group sent letters to all firms which were using women as sex symbols, with copies to all advertising agents in the country, indicating that copies were also being sent to the President. Although they received no replies to the letters, many of the advertisements were subsequently withdrawn.

** In the UK a group called AFFIRM (Alliance for Fair Images and Representation in the Media) was instrumental in bringing about the redesign of a particularly offensive popular book cover in 1979.

** A group of women in the Federal Republic of Germany bring out a paper, *Modern Housewife* and puts pressure on the media for more realistic treatment of the "houseworker's" condition and for discussion of questions like the economic value of housework and the sharing of family roles.

** A US group, Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media, formed in 1976, has been successful in persuading Max Factor to redesign an advertising campaign which exploited women's fears of rape and mugging in big cities.



criticised by the Committee in 1983-84 have not appeared again, it is difficult to say whether this was in response to the criticism or the advertisers' practice of periodically launching new campaigns. But, some dent was certainly made.

Protests against radio spots propagating dowry resulted in their withdrawal by All India Radio. In the early 80s, a number of bank advertisements used to dwell on the daughter's-marriage-son's-education theme. Today, on the State Bank

Direct Action

The following reports of actions against media images have been compiled from Manushi.

** In Patna, a group of girls and a few boys belonging to the Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini blacked out a hoarding in front of Patna Women's College. It was an advertisement for a jeep, displaying a half-naked women's body together with several motor parts. A week later, a group of men and women students went around the whole city, blacking out all obscene hoardings. (July-August 1979)

** In Britain, a group called Angry Women set fire to sex shops in Leeds as part of their protest against images of women "as sexual conveniences for men to abuse, hurt and degrade". They charged that pornography is violence against women and an incitement to rape. (No. 8, 1981)

of India premises, the picture of a bridal couple for a Savings Scheme has the non-sexist caption, 'Save-For-Our-Children's-Marriage'.

On the other hand, advertisements like the one for Duncan's Tea (selling a superficial image of the modern woman) and the cooking medium advertisements which equated vanaspati and refined oils with maternal love, were heavily criticised but continue to appear — showing how difficult is the battle against images whose sexism is subtle rather than blatant.

A prominent campaign by the Committee was against the screening of pornographic films in Delhi (see last item in box, 'Direct Action'). Members of

** In Delhi, about a hundred women and men demonstrated outside Plaza cinema against a Malayalam film advertised in English as *Sexy Girl*. The three organisations participating were Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Co-ordination Committee of Working Women and Jan Sanskriti (No. 8, 1981)

** In Ahmedabad, AWAG and two other groups demonstrated against a Gujarati play, *Aaje Dhando Bandh Chhe* which was full of obscene dialogues and scenes, while ostensibly trying to portray the "rehabilitation of prostitutes". Press advertisements and hoardings of the play were aimed at titillating the public. Prior to the demonstration, the women had appealed to the Minister for Cultural Affairs to withdraw the licence for staging the play. Subsequently, the drama troupe left the city, while notices were served on two other troupes staging similar obscene plays.

** A procession organised in Madras by Pennurimai Iyyakkam, with a charter of demands, began by burning Tamil magazines which portray women in an obscene and degrading manner. Along the procession route, obscene hoardings were defaced by the participants with cowdung and tar. (No. 11, 1982)

** In a letter to *Manushi*, the FAOW condemned the five-part series of advertisements for *Kohinoor* condoms which appeared in many magazines. They charged that the advertisements dehumanise the man-woman relationship and advocate rape and violence. (No. 15, 1983)

** The Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media demonstrated outside Odeon Cinema in New Delhi against the screening of a pornographic Malayalam film called *Crazy Lady*. They demanded that such films be banned and condemned the newspapers which publish advertisements for these films. They also blackened some hoardings outside the theatre.

The manager of the cinema came out to talk to the demonstrators and said that the film was being screened only because it had been passed by the Censor Board. After a discussion with the proprietor, the film was immediately withdrawn, the current show cancelled, and the proprietor "went so far as to invite all the demonstrators in for a cold drink!" (No. 17, 1983)

this Committee edited an issue of Seminar (August 1984) on the theme of 'Sexism in the Media' and collaborated with the YWCA to produce a special issue of the magazine *Today*, devoted to the topic, 'Media's Portrayal of Women'.

The Committee also collaborated with the Centre for Women's Development Studies and the government-appointed panel on software for television, to draw up guidelines for non-sexist portrayal of women in television images.

However, after the spate of activities during 1983-84, the Delhi group seems to be more or less dormant, though a few members continue to do what they can at their individual levels.

Media Women's Efforts

In 1985, soon after the then Information Minister, V.N.Gadgil, announced a proposal to draw up norms for positive TV images of women, a group of women journalists in Bombay decided to form a Women and Media Group to initiate actions against stereotyping and trivialising of women's images in the media. The group also has non-journalist members. They meet every week and write letters to the press criticising articles and advertisements denigrating women.[3]

Their letter protesting against an obscene advertisement for Allwyn watches was published by the *Indian Express* with an editor's note that the complaint was being forwarded to the advertising agency concerned. The advertisement did not appear again. A letter in the *Illustrated Weekly* (June 23, 1985) protested against the magazine's use of titillating and irrelevant pictures to illustrate an article on blue films. The letter denounced the *Weekly's* consistently sexist policy, citing a string of examples from previous issues. The group also initiated discussions in the press during the countrywide campaign against Simi's TV programme.

A detailed report was prepared by this group on the impact on women of the 1985 Ahmedabad riots, the gist of which was reported in many national dailies while the full text was published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 12, 1985). It was an important initiative at correcting media's negligence on the women's perspective in general reportage.

This group participated in the workshop on communications at the December 1985 conference in Bombay where many thorny questions about the relationship between the media and the movement were discussed. Their findings from a survey on women in journalism were presented at the Chandigarh Women's Studies Conference in October 1986. (*Women and Media*, 1986)

A rather superficial story on women journalists put out by UNI and published by most newspapers in early 1987 was strongly criticised by the media group in a letter to the UNI general manager.[4] The group has also contributed to a special issue of *Countermedia*[5] on the theme of women and the media. (Vol. 1, No. 4, 1987)

The Pioneers

One media-monitoring group which has been active since the early part of the Women's Decade is the Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG).[6]

Though formally set up in 1981, its members have been working on the theme of sexist media images since 1976, critiquing advertisements, films, plays, textbooks, etc. They have taken a mobile exhibition around Gujarat to raise awareness about sexism in advertising.

AWAG's analysis of sexism in Gujarati textbooks was favourably received by the state government authorities. The group has staged demonstrations against obscene Gujarati plays, presented seminar papers and written articles on sexist images. Recently, AWAG was among several women's groups of Ahmedabad which successfully stalled the broadcast of a sexist play over All India Radio.[7]

Emerging Critiques of Sexism

A look at the items in the box , 'Direct Action', shows that protests against obscenity have been fairly frequent in the past, while action against the subtler aspects of sexism in the media is yet to gather momentum. However, with the appearance of "woman-oriented" serials on TV, some of which have only reinforced traditional stereotypes, more vocal criticism of sexism has begun to emerge and needs to be strategised with effective action.

Many feminists have written articles in the general media criticising the government's new bill which prohibits "indecent representation" of women through the media, but does not include sexist portrayals within its purview. Magazine articles have critiqued the "heroines" of the new TV serials and the retrograde themes of some of these. *Swayamsiddha*, the story of a divorced woman, by playwright Vijay Tendulkar, (who has a "progressive" public image) has come under heavy attack. In mid-1987 Bombay's Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) was reportedly collecting signatures for a memorandum protesting against Doordarshan's appointment of Tendulkar as "Producer Emeritus". The FAOW statement is a detailed feminist critique on *Swayamsiddha* which they cite as an example of the playwright's negative and narrow portrayal of human nature. (*Sunday*, Aug 2, 1987)

At the December 1985 conference, participants critiqued the images of *Rajani*, the role-reversal theme of *Mr Ya Mrs*, the strong woman image of Ketaki in *Khandaan*, and the images of women in soap operas like *Hum Log*. (FAOW-c 1985)

Film reviews written from a feminist standpoint and examining sexist values not only in commercial cinema but also in the critically acclaimed "art cinema", appear regularly in *Manushi*. And *Eve's Weekly* regularly publishes Maithili Rao's feminist analysis of Hindi and regional films. All these add up to an encouraging picture of feminist critiquing and monitoring of media images which are sexist and stereotyped. As far as generating critical awareness goes, such critiques have tended to remain within activist circles and are only slowly percolating to a larger public.

How feminist groups will go about using these critiques in the task of influencing policies and trends in the mass media, including images in advertising, and how they will generate wider and stronger public opinion remains to be seen.

References and Notes

1. Copies of *Newsletter* and other materials sent to me by Marjorie Lee of Women's Media Action Group, London.
2. The Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media: A report by Bina Agarwal and Kamla Bhasin (mimeo).
3. *Women News*, Newsletter of the Women's Centre, Bombay, March-October 1985.
4. Copy of letter sent to me by Women and Media Group. Not known if it was published anywhere.
5. This journal, started in 1986 by a group of progressive Bombay journalists, critiques and analyses different forms of bias in the media. The interest shown by this all-male editorial team in the women-and-media issue is a welcome feature.
6. AWAG's *Battle Against the Media* by Ila Pathak in Bhasin and Agarwal (eds) 1984.
7. 'Sexist play stopped' by Tanushree Gangopadhyaya, *Hindustan Times Sunday Magazine*, August 9, 1987. The play in question, *Ashwamedha*, was on the theme of an ancient queen's sexual obsession for horses. There was a controversy over whether or not the play was obscene and whether it was appropriate for a medium like radio. The article says that AIR, which should have scrutinised the play more carefully before accepting it, was misled by its title into thinking it was a harmless mythological story and was "swayed" by the name of the author who is a literary figure in Gujarat. The report points out that AIR does not seem to have any proper guidelines and perspective for evaluating broadcast material in the context of their portrayal of women.

What's the Noise About? How the Establishment Responds to Criticism

Critiques of stereotypes and sexism in media images evoke responses from media persons which range from being "puzzled" to being hostile. "Freedom of the press" is another argument in defence of existing images. Occasionally a few people in positions of authority have been receptive and in recent years several national governments have set up panels to examine women's imagery in various media.[1] Generally the biggest problem in trying to influence policy has been the attitude that the feminist perspective on media images is only a "minority" viewpoint.

Some years ago the 'Marketing and Advertising' column in the *Economic Times* described an advertisement for State Bank's travellers' cheques which said: "On a shopping spree, your wife isn't the only one to pick your pocket." The picture showed a husband and wife with arms full of parcels and a pickpocket's hand lifting the wallet from the man's pocket. The male columnist comments: "Women libbers are sure to have something to say about this advertisement."

Today, some media commentators have probably learnt to recognise what sort of images will attract feminist criticism but do not themselves feel inclined to look at these images from a new and non-traditional standpoint. And if at all they try, then they don't seem to understand what the noise is about, what exactly is it that offends the feminist groups.

Sexism is "Normal"

In the above instance, the columnist goes on to describe an exhibition organised by AWAG in Bombay on the theme 'Insult and Injury Done to Women through Advertising', and confesses that he found the graffiti on the offensive advertisements "quite puzzling". He could "make neither head nor tail" of a comment against an advertisement for Anne French hair removing cream, where the copy urges the consumer to "put away that razor". The Lakme advertisement which says: "Over 30? Here's how you can look under 25," had the retort: "Over 30— and proud of it!" Not only is the columnist foxed by this one, his own bewildered response is: "Surely the advertisement is talking of a normal human desire. And *Lakme's* chief is not a male chauvinist but Mrs. Simone Tata."

The presumption is that, one, it is "normal" to equate beauty with youth, and two, an image or a message can be offensive to feminists only if it has been designed by a man; images created by women and acceptable to "most women" must therefore be quite valid. These are some of the reactions to campaigns against existing images which are largely seen as reflecting nothing more than reality. And this explains the strong resistance to suggestions for change.

During a panel discussion in Bombay on women's images in advertising, the chief of a market research group is reported to have suggested that "the urban housewife" no longer identifies with the Sati/Savitri image. Another top advertising agency executive, however, disagreed, asserting that advertisers who had "fallen prey" to the idea that the Indian woman had changed, had got their fingers burnt.[2]

Universal Problem

Resistance to campaigns against sexism seems to be universal as seen from two examples reported in the British feminist journal *Spare Rib*.

One was a complaint against an advertisement for Hertz rental cars which highlighted the willingness of the 'Hertz girl' to "say yes" as part of the special service. Among other things, a media group in London objected to the sexual overtones of the phrase "saying yes", and the complaint was sent to Hertz and to the *Guardian* which had published the advertisement.[3]

The *Guardian* sympathised with the protestors' sentiments, apologised for causing them offence, but said that it was not their policy to censor advertisements which are "within the limits of the law". The Hertz managing director disagreed with all the objections in the complaint and denied that there were any sexual overtones or anything degrading to women in the advertisements.

The second example is an article by members of the UK group, AFFIRM, criticising the British Advertising Standards Authority's (ASA) stand on sexism which is roughly: you have your views and other people have theirs.[4]

The ASA rejected the group's complaint against Wells' "juicy, fruity, fresh and cheap" orange juice advertisement, saying that although the words *could* apply to the woman in the advertisement, they could equally well apply to the orange juice! They were of the view that the advertisement was not making any derogatory statement about women in general.

Need for a Non-Sexist Code

In 1982, the advertising profession in India presented to the 13th Asian Advertising Congress at New Delhi, its own code for "self-regulation" to ensure ethical advertising. Not surprisingly the code contained no criteria to avoid sexist stereotypes. It would, of course, be unrealistic to expect the advertising profession to incorporate such criteria on its own initiative. But the time is ripe for media groups to lobby for the drawing up of such guidelines.

The experience of the Women's Media Action Group in London suggests that over a period of time even a body like the ASA will be compelled to respond if the pressure is kept up. For example, it is reported that in 1982, because of the large number of complaints received in the preceding years, the ASA undertook a survey on the treatment of women in advertisements and published a report,

Breathtaking Logic

"Naked women continue to be draped over hi-fi equipment; portrayed as 'mistresses' and 'seductresses'. Advertisers have their own non-statutory code, administered by the Advertising Standards Authority; advertisements are meant to be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' and they are not supposed to cause 'grave or widespread offence' in the light of 'prevailing standards of decency and propriety'. Many feminists take the view that a lot of advertisements fall short of the mark and have complained regularly to the ASA (in the UK).

"In 1980, the Authority looked into 37 complaints based on allegations that the advertisements were offensive to women. Twenty-nine were dismissed. Typical of those not upheld was an advertisement for *Kawasaki* motorbikes, which pictured a woman's legs and feet (in stiletto-heeled shoes) with her knickers round her ankles. The caption read: 'We'll never let you down.' The Authority 'deplored the advertiser's low level of taste' but 'considered the advertisement was unlikely to cause grave or widespread offence'. Also unsuccessful was a complaint from the EOC (Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC (Trades Union Congress) against an insurance advertisement depicting a scantily clad woman. The headline warned: 'Guard your goods... A lorry load of goods — like a beautiful girl — will vanish if you don't look after it.' The advertisement was intended for lorry drivers and the ASA 'did not believe that it would be offensive to those who received it.' Another 'scantily dressed female' was featured in an advertisement for cut-price carpets under the caption: 'My business is on the floor.' The complaint was dismissed on the ground that the advertisement 'had been appearing from time to time and neither the publishers nor advertisers had received any previous complaints.' "

— extracted from
Coote and Campbell, 1982

Herself Appraised. Though the ASA claimed that the feminist viewpoint on media images did not find wide support among the women interviewed, the point is that the ASA would have made no move at all but for the persistence of feminist campaigning.

In 1986, the media group responded with their own report, *Ourselves Appraised*, and drew up a non-sexist code for advertisers. This was presented to the ASA along with a portfolio of advertisements to illustrate the dos and don'ts of the code.

Of course, such initiatives are never smooth sailing. Marjorie Lee of the media group informs me that the ASA "demolished our code, item by item, and they were deliberately obtuse".[5] About the clause which said that an advertisement should not portray a woman as "sexually available", the ASA said they were "far from clear what you have in mind". Wondering if the phrase is really so ambiguous, she asks me: "Do *you* understand what we mean by 'sexually available'?" Of course. But, I admit I would find it difficult to spell out how an advertisement portrays a woman as sexually available to someone who couldn't see it for himself!

Receptivity Varies

Outside the ad world, responses from the authorities to critiques of sexism appear to vary according to the receptivity of the individuals holding positions of power. For example, when AWAG demonstrated against obscene Gujarati plays in Ahmedabad, the licensing board was sympathetic to their criticism and invited their group to have discussions with the Board. Then there was a change in the membership of the board and the newer members "preferred to ignore us and the present chairman refuses to take cognisance of our communications".

Again, AWAG's critique of sexism in textbooks was welcomed by the textbook production board which even accepted the suggested guidelines for authors to avoid

Sexism Doesn't Count

Sexist portrayal of women has no place at present in the criteria for evaluating ethical advertising. A British media group commenting on the attitudes of the authorities says:

"They can spot a nude when they see one and disapprove, but don't delve much deeper — though they do claim to know the difference between feminist objections at nudity as such. Job advertisements that are overtly discriminatory (Girl Friday Wanted) are relatively easy to deal with because they break the law. Advertisements like those for Green Shield stamps that idealise women as housewives and insist on our role within the family as carers, consumers and dependents, are not illegal — or indecent — they're just sexist, and that doesn't count."

— Nichols and Moan
in *Spare Rib Reader*, 1982

sexism. But the move was resisted by academicians who felt that sexism in textbooks was a non-issue.[6]

Hostile and Irrational

Interestingly, people in the world of journalism seem to exhibit both hostile and irrational reactions to feminist critiques of sexism. In 1983-84, when the Delhi media group launched a high-visibility campaign against sexist bias in advertising and in reportage, a typical comment appeared in the 'Tank Bund Notebook' column of the Hyderabad *Indian Express* (February 13, 1984):

"We do not deny the bias, if it can be so-called. The short point we wish to make is that it is an essential ingredient of media appeal, at home and abroad. We may also add, even at the risk of bringing a hornet's nest about our ears, that women like to be portrayed as eye-catching objects, on and off the screen. As for men, it is one of the few sources of vicarious enjoyment left..." The humorists of this column, all newspaper staffers, also chose to interpret feminist disapproval of the exploitation of female bodies in advertisements as a desire to see exposed male bodies instead.

Another irrational tirade against the Delhi group's campaign was seen in Anil Dharkar's TV column in the *Sunday Observer* (January 1, 1984). Reviewing the Delhi group's discussion on Doordarshan, compered by media personality Nalini Singh, he begins by stating that "many of us" have been concerned about images of women in cinema for quite sometime and that "feminists have now begun to worry about it too".

Describing the discussion as "earnest", and adding that "no one can accuse feminists of an excess of humour," the critic gives the lie to his opening statement of concern about women's images by writing: "Having aired the programme and having got those pesky women off its hairy chest, Doordarshan a few days later showed *Swarag Narak*, the most reactionary and most blatantly sexist film of recent times. Take that Ms. Singh and Co.! Take that and smoke it!"

The only charitable explanation for this sulky outburst is that the critic was perhaps peeved that *feminists* had made a point which he might otherwise have agreed with.

Twisting Beyond Recognition

The ultimate in irrational reaction was probably the sequel to the Delhi group's demonstration against pornographic Malayalam films in the capital. This campaign was twisted by prominent film personalities, with the connivance of the print media, and made to seem like a parochial attack by North Indians on South Indian movies. As one member of the group narrates it:[7]

"Soon the Malayalam Film Society in Delhi swung into action and within 10 days organised a high-flying seminar on *Sex and Violence in Indian Cinema*, with VIP male cinema folks flying into Delhi for it — like wife-basher Basu Bhattacharya and Marxist-leaning Adoor Gopalakrishnan chairing it. We were not

invited to it and I just happened to glance at the City Diary that day and read about it, figured it had something to do with us and even though we had a meeting of the Print Media Sub-Group that evening, persuaded others to come to it as it was about us. Yes, I was dead right. Here was an august gathering of some 60 men, mostly Southerners, who made it into a communal issue and refused to let us have our say. I virtually had to shout to get 'space' granted for 15 minutes to make a point at this hostile seminar.

"Yet, only the *Statesman* covered it giving both sides of the story, whilst the news agencies flashed all over: 'Malayalam Films Maligned, says Adoor.' Our protest was simply eliminated from the news reports...none of us could have imagined that protesting porn, whether it came from West, East, North or South could cause so much communal passion."

Freedom to Malign?

And finally, there is the defence which takes refuge in the concept of "freedom of the press". This was what happened when a large gathering of women in Delhi protested against a cover story on rape published by a magazine called *India 2000* (December 1983). A number of grossly indecent and titillating pictures were used to illustrate a supposedly analytical article on the amendments to the rape law. The protestors had objected to the pictures as well as the tone and language of the text which were derogatory to women and referred insultingly to the campaign against the inadequate rape law. (This campaign had centered around the famous Mathura case and had resulted in the government responding to feminist protests and amending the rape law to plug some of the loopholes.)

The demonstration was held at the place described as the "registered editorial address" of the magazine — which turned out to be the editor's house. Publishing the latter's protest against what he describes as "trespass", the *Hindustan Times* headlined it: 'Protestors "rape" editor's house.' (December 26, 1983)

Tough Battle

"In France, it took over a year for women — working through a member of Parliament and eventually a government committee — to have a ban placed on *Detective*, whose publicity posters and contents seriously degraded women. The women activists came into conflict with various levels of interest in the media. They were opposed not only by the owner of the magazine — whose weekly circulation of 3,80,000 make it a money-making enterprise — but by a body of journalists who contested the ban in the name of freedom of the press and who, according to one analysis, used the event in order to scapegoat the women's movement by simplistically associating it with a repressive and conservative morality."

— extracted from Gallagher, 1981

The editor defended the article by saying that there are many opposing views on the new rape law, that the behaviour of the demonstrators was fascist and that "freedom of speech and a free press entail that ideas offensive to some will be publicised".

In their rejoinder, the demonstrators asserted that they too supported the freedom of the press but such freedom did not justify the author of the article describing the Mathura case as a "pedestrian event" or arguing that women who are "sexually forward" deserve to be raped.

It is generally seen that protection of "artistic" and "editorial" freedom, plus disapproval of "prudish" morality are the two arguments resorted to by the media establishment whenever media critics attack obscenity in print and film.[8] On their part, feminist campaigners against pornography face the problem of getting clubbed with orthodox right-wing groups who too are vocal on this issue.

"Responsible" Minority

Against this, the major obstacle faced when campaigning against sexist stereotypes is the problem of being dismissed as a "minority" viewpoint.

For example, in UK the Advertising Standards Authority, while investigating a complaint against an advertisement, tries to assess how "representative" the complaint is, and whether the advertisement will "offend the majority of the people who see it". In its own survey, *Herself Appraised*, the ASA had stated that the response of the majority of women did not coincide with feminist objections to many advertising images.

However, the London Media Action Group draws attention to a sentence in the chairman's 'Foreword' to the ASA report, which says that if an advertisement offends "a responsible minority" then the sensitivities of that minority must prevail.

This then is the crux of the issue for media-monitoring groups everywhere: to get the authorities to acknowledge that their critique of sexism comes from a "responsible" section, even if it is a minority, and is therefore valid.

Raising the Noise Level

And till that happens, the strategy against sexist images has to be twofold: one, keep on making a noise; and two, generate greater awareness to build up public opinion towards converting that minority opinion into a majority one. Noise helps, and as the British group's experience has shown, getting many women to complain about an advertisement can "deter" the manufacturer from using the advertisement again.[9]

In the UK, every complaint against an advertisement is investigated and the decision, whether for or against, is published in the ASA's monthly report. And being complained against is regarded as "bad publicity". This is something which could be lobbied for in our country, too, by initiating a dialogue with the advertising authority here, and also actively generating adverse publicity for offensive advertisements, using women's pages and letters to the editor columns for this purpose.

The second point — building up public opinion — calls for sustained work from media groups which so far have not done much on this front. (When the Delhi group was active they reportedly conducted some very sitmulating programmes with students.) The experience of the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) reveals the potential and importance of such initiatives.[10]

CAP, which has shown its slide programme on media images to students, women's groups and trade unions, says that, for most of the audience, exposure to such a critique comes as an eye-opener. After seeing the slides women viewers became more aware of hidden messages and sexist portrayals.

"Most men have a better understanding while some find it hard to discard the old value which they have been taught to believe and accept."

Many groups campaigning against sexism face the argument that the models quite willingly display their bodies or act in obscene plays and films and do not themselves object to sexist portrayal. This calls for a more extended discussion on the kind of lifestyles and consumption patterns being encouraged by advertising, the deeper implications of sexism in media images, and the question of who "controls" these images.

Groups from different parts of the world report that getting women involved in media monitoring helps to heighten their critical awareness. For example, women recruited for a monitoring project in the US are quoted as saying (Gallagher, 1981):

"We learned not to drink it all in assuming it had no effect on us."

"I became more aware and angry."

"I had never actually analysed what I was seeing. Now I have a more critical eye."

Ultimately it will have to be through the creation of a strong climate of opinion among large numbers of women if any impact is going to be made on policy-making, or any influence exerted towards changing the prevailing imagery of women in the media.[11]

References and Notes

1. Such projects have been reported in Norway, Denmark and Sweden (Gallagher 1981). In India too the Joshi Committee report has an excellent set of recommendations on the portrayal of women on television.
2. *Times of India*, August 2, 1985 (listed in *News for Action* fortnightly, Build Documentation Centre, Bombay).
3. 'Put a Her in your Hertz' by Anna Coote in *Spare Rib Reader*, 1982.
4. 'What Offends One of Us Won't Offend the Next Chap' by Jill Nichols and Pat Moan in *Spare Rib Reader*,1982.
5. All information on Women's Media Action Group from Marjorie Lee.
6. 'AWAG's Battle Against the Media' by Ila Pathak in Bhasin and Agarwal (eds) 1984.
7. Personal communication from Nina Kapoor of the Delhi Media Group.
8. For example, some magazine reports on the campaign against Malayalam porn films made it seem like a prudish and narrow-minded reaction on the part of the protestors. The art-vs-obscenity argument is a standard response everywhere to the campaign against

porn. The issue gets further complicated because feminist groups have strong misgivings over "censorship" as a tool to curb obscenity since this puts arbitrary powers in the hands of government authorities.

9. This has been experienced in India too. See chapter on 'The Watchdogs'.
10. 'Consumer Education for Women' — an article by the Consumers' Association of Penang about its slide show which is based on its book, *Abuse of Women in the Media* (1982), in Bhasin and Agarwal (eds) 1984.
11. Feminist critics of the Bill on Indecent Portrayal have stressed that by equating indecency with nudity and the like it is implied that all other images of women are "decent". If norms prohibiting *sexism* in media images are to be drawn up, strong public opinion will have to be mobilised.

Inside Stories
Media Women's Efforts within the System

> "The feminist perspective of a senior journalist, reflected in the character of the paper she edits, has received indirect complaints from the proprietor. And, on the whole, being seen as 'too feminist' is felt to work against your perceived 'professionalism'."
>
> — *Women and Media*, 1981

Women journalists who are part of, or sympathetic to, the feminist movement are working in different ways within the existing system towards increasing coverage of feminist issues and towards changing sexist images in media output. For many it is a lonely battle, having to face indifference and hostility from editorial hierarchies and from managements. There is also the hazard of getting "branded" which can be professionally counter-productive.

Here, four women journalists talk about their successes and failures: in getting their papers to focus on women's issues and incorporate the feminist dimension in such coverage; persuading colleagues and seniors to acknowledge the validity of such a perspective.[1]

"Resigned to Negative Responses"

This sums up the rather disheartened observations of a journalist who has been active with a media monitoring group, writes occasional pieces on women's issues and has links with women's groups.

"I have had limited success in getting the papers I have worked for to cover feminist issues. This is because most papers and magazines are obsessed with 'news' and a story generally has to have a new angle to be acceptable." She points out that in the field of "atrocity journalism" there is today plenty of coverage on rape and dowry deaths, but generally the attitudes of bosses and colleagues are anti-feminist. Reactions to suggestions for coverage on women's issues range from indifference to arguments like "men are exploited too".

"What is worse is that one gets so accustomed to negative responses that one expects them and so one does not try to sell ideas even to a new boss. Only if an editor shows interest, do I tend to push any idea. In the initial years I faced so much indifference that I no longer make much effort. And yet, the climate has changed and today people are far more responsive than ever before, to women's issues.

It Can Be Done

On the efforts of women journalists to integrate feminist issues into general media coverage, Margaret Gallagher quotes a study by Gaye Tuchman and writes:

"For instance, 'committed' women who are recognised by their male colleagues as subscribing to professional ideologies can bring women's stories into focus for the general public. One very well-established woman journalist in the United States could say: 'I have never, well very rarely, done a piece that didn't run pretty much as I wrote it and the length I wrote it. The national editor is happy to have me telling him, "This is good, we have to cover this." My ability to define stories is because of professionalism.'

"She explained how she instituted national *New York Times* coverage of the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment: 'In 1971, the first time ERA was in the House, I became aware of it, and I became aware that no one else was interested in covering it and they thought it peculiar that I was interested. If you volunteer for work, you're allowed to do it. I created a national women's rights beat here.'

"Another experienced professional, who became editor of the *New York Times* women's page in 1975, began to cover the American women's movement without referring to her managing editor: She 'just started to do it'. Moreover, stories were not confined to the women's page alone: in 1975 she noted that each month three or four 'women's page' stories were actually *starting* on page one of the paper. This was said to be at least in part because coverage of women's stories was having an impact on male editors, who were realising the importance of previously ignored topics.

"However, despite such instances, the potential impact of media women is fundamentally limited. As long as they work within structures in which final editorial decisions are made by men, their interests are likely to be judged as secondary or peripheral. As one woman professional suggests, 'half of where a story goes has to do with the kind of news day it is. If it's slow, the story (one of her feminist stories) may be on page one. But if it's heavy (i.e. if the story must compete with many others) it goes inside and may be offered to the women's page.' She continues, 'perhaps it's unconscious discrimination.'"

— from Gallagher, 1981

"Though I have not been able to convince male colleagues on the validity of the feminist perspective, I have been able to help women colleagues to evolve and sharpen their perspective to some extent."

On attitudes of editorial and managerial hierarchy to feminist writing: "Yes, there is some hostility, just as there is some support, from senior editorial staff. No, I am not aware of any directives to tone down radical feminist writing. I don't think feminists pose the kind of threat that, say, opposition politics does. They can always be dismissed as cranks and crazy individuals, or hysterical women. It is even simpler to just ignore them or reject the material they give. Some editors encourage feminist writing because it is now in fashion to cover women's issues."

Getting "Branded" is a Minus Point

To the question, is it in one's career interest to be seen as a feminist journalist, another journalist replies: "I think the answer would be, sadly, no. The general perception among men and most women journalists is that if you do take a strong view on women's issues ('women's lib stuff'), you are slotted into a 'woman reporter' category. In some way you do become marginalised, don't get serious assignments like politics, science, etc. However, since women's issues *are* getting increased coverage in most papers today, some women do write on subjects like violence,

Working from within: three actresses speak

The following is an extract from an interview published in *Manushi* (No.36, 1986) in which award-winning film-maker and activist Anand Patwardhan talks to Shabana Azmi, well known actress who has been involved in the issue of the rights of slum dwellers.

Anand: People suggest that I should make some advertising and fiction films to make money so that I can then make films I believe in. Do you think it is possible to separate work from belief?

Shabana: I have been separating them for a long time, but I can't do it anymore. In the past I have done films which go against my grain. But now, for no amount of money in the world would I do a film where a woman is degraded. For example, a film called *Nasib Apna Apna* was offered to me. It is about a woman whose husband leaves her for another woman because she is not pretty. Then she becomes very glamorous and falls at his feet to get him to take her back. The posters showed both women falling at the man's feet and the slogan read: "Whether good or bad, my husband is my god." I was absolutely furious that the producer should even want to make such a film. He looked at me as if I was mad. He said the film would be a success. And it was a success.

A few years ago I did act in films like *Thodi Si Bewafai* in which there is a dialogue: "It is better to be miserable in one's husband's

dowry, etc. without risking their careers. I think one has to have a careful mix, and not veer too obviously to women's subjects. Many women would rather not take the risk and steer clear of this area altogether, which is a real pity. This is a strange bias that exists in the profession — one does not find men who concentrate on, or prefer to write on, a chosen area being similarly 'branded'."

This journalist suggests that the risk of getting branded may be one reason for the lack of interest among many women journalists to get involved in media-monitoring activity.

A Pragmatic Approach

A senior journalist, who in addition to her regular writings on general issues also handles the women's page of her paper, says:

"Strident feminism creates a kind of journalist ghetto into which no male cares to enter, and this tends to be counter-productive since one can't move towards

house than to be happy in one's natal home." Now I could never work in such a film.

Anand: Given the nature of the commercial film industry, don't you feel that it is almost inevitable for the values of the dominant power groups in society to get reflected in commercial films?

Shabana: I think the best way to fight it is to join the fray. It's all very well to make films which are viewed by a handful of people who are, in any case, "enlightened". But it is necessary to bring about a change in the mainstream cinema as well.

I think it is very important to have more thinking writers in the industry. If we had better writers, better films could be made. Because, I think, often people are not even aware of what they are perpetuating in their films. I don't think all of them are evil, I think they are naive almost. When you point out the stereotypes in their films, they say: "We are calling women goddesses. How can you say we are against women?" Therefore, I would work in a film that has traditional values but doesn't say anything against women although it doesn't have anything of very great value to say, either. For instance, in one film I was doing, my daughter got raped and about 20 scenes later, she was shown wearing a black sari. I asked: "Why show her in black?" They said: "Madam she was raped." I screamed and shouted and said: "So what? Is she going to wear black all her life? In any case she is the victim. She hasn't committed the rape." Later in the film she throws up in the bathroom and I realise she is pregnant. I was supposed to say: "Oh my god, we are ruined." Now I wanted to change that. But if I told them that I shouldn't say we are ruined because we are not really ruined, they would have looked at me in horror and thought me perfectly immoral. So I quickly calculated and said: "If I say that, then, when she commits suicide in the next scene, the audience will think that the

equality without co-operation from the other side. This is a fact of logic as much as it is of socio-economics. Women have to talk about women or no one else will but the movement must periodically take stock of whether both sides involved in the hoped-for end result are listening.

"This is why, professionally I try not to get identified too closely with just women's issues. It does not mean that I am unconcerned or uninvolved, merely that I must write enough of interesting 'other stuff' to ensure that readers will not dismiss everything carrying my byline as 'oh, the usual do-gooding'. This way there are greater chances of articles on women's issues being read by everybody.

"For the same reason I tread softly in my professional relationships within the organisations, knowing that aggression will never achieve what we are aiming at in the traditional workplace, even if it is peopled by intellectuals who have no business being gender-chauvinistic but who also happen to be men who are."

mother drove the daughter to suicide by saying 'we are ruined'. So, can I say something like 'Oh my god, what shall we do?'" And they said: "Yes! Yes, you can do that."

So, by playing clever little games, one brings about small changes. People criticise me for this but if better lines can be put in, even though the contour of the film does not change, I don't see why it should not be done.

The Midway Path

This is another extract from *Manushi* (No.38, 1987) in which editor Madhu Kishwar talks to actress Smita Patil, who had been associated with the work of Bombay's Women's Centre. The interview was published after Smita's untimely death in December 1986.

Do you think you can make a breakthrough in the portrayal of women in commercial cinema?

Smita: I really don't know. If I refuse an offer because I find the script offensive, someone else can always be found to accept it. But one can encourage the films that are midway between the commercial and the art cinema. A film like *Bheegi Palkein* in which I acted. It is a bad film but it has good things in it. It is about a conventional woman who tries to keep her family together but her husband is uncooperative so they part company. After 20 years they meet again. She is teaching in an orphanage. He asks her to come back to him. She feels it is too late. He tries to persuade her. Then she says: "As a husband you always decided for me. Today, decide for me as a friend." He says: "The husband has lost and the friend has won." She does not go back to him.

In a commercial film, I can refuse a particular line which makes me sound like a slave to my husband. But I have to refuse in a gentle

Her own writing on women's issues is not of the consciously polemical variety and this is the kind of writing she tries to encourage for the women's page, where she tries to keep "the general reader in mind, as well as, the general kind of woman reader". However, propagating feminist ideas within the constraints of the traditional media atmosphere inevitably poses problems.

"I do try to use pieces which will make women aware of their importance as individuals rather than as roles, but I must admit that such realisation too often causes more heartburns in a society which is still ordered on traditional divisions. But I try nonetheless, since I know that there is no other way to change the status quo...I have been accused of 'imposing aspirations on women who don't want them' but instead of getting into an argument which could end in the editor using his prerogative to stop all such articles, I have tried to tone down without really sacrificing the message."

manner. You have to handle these men gently so that you don't hurt their ego, and you make them feel the great bosses of the whole world. Although I have fought over such lines, sometimes I would feel it is useless to fight because even though not saying that line might ease my conscience, the presence or absence of that line will not make any real difference to the formula film as a whole.

Which film has been to your satisfaction?

Umbartha (Subah). It portrays a middle-class woman struggling with herself, with her family, with society in general, and with other women.

You Need Power

Charu Shahane talks to actress Aneeta Kanwar of Buniyaad fame (*Express Magazine*, February 15, 1987):

Will you ever ask for changes in the script if you don't like what you're doing in the film?

Aneeta: That sort of thing is possible only if you have power. At the moment I don't have that sort of power.

Can an actress separate personal convictions and ideals from her work?

Sometimes, not always. I've lost out on innumerable films in which they wanted me to "expose" my body or have got out of the situation diplomatically, but it's not always possible.

Shabana Azmi claims that she refuses to say lines that denigrate women.

What she's doing is correct. The way people perceive women is naturally affected by what they see in films — she must do what she's doing. But again, she has the power to make changes. If I had that power, I'd do the same.

Lone Ranger

A reporter in a features periodical says that she often suggests women's issues for coverage and writes on them with a feminist perspective. Her suggestions are accepted most of the time because they satisfy the professional criteria of topicality, newsworthiness, etc. But she hesitates to go on making such suggestions "week after week" because she is usually the only one doing so. As for "converting" colleagues to accept the feminist viewpoint, she says she doesn't even try because she's sure to meet with resistance and hostility. On the other hand, she has learned how to "sell" the idea for a feminist article to the editorial hierarchy on terms which *they* relate to — like topicality, etc — and has generally succeeded in getting such items places as prominently as they deserve.

On the use of the sexist language in her paper, she says blatant terms like "fair sex" are rarely used, "newsmen" constantly is. "But I've never pointed this out of pure diffidence and a desire not to let any possible hostility ensuing from this jeopardise the freedom I have in my writing."

And when the paper takes an objectionable editorial stand or prints sexist stuff? "I've objected only once or twice. I find no vocal support on this from others. I must explain, I'm constantly arguing with my editor on various issues and feel tired of doing so all the time."

On the implications of being a feminist journalist: "In the profession you are definitely branded and even dismissed by senior/contemporary males as a 'rabid feminist'." Colleagues, she feels, are sceptical of feminist writing which they equate with a lack of objectivity. Because of this prejudice she makes double sure of getting all the facts correct, keeping "editorialising" to a minimum, and avoiding a previous tendency towards "sloganeering".

Proud To Be A Feminist Journalist

A freelancer, who is also an activist, says that she has built up a rapport with the news editor of a local daily and because of this her reports on local activist events get published. But it is something of a "favour", especially since there is always pressure on space. And while such items may get accommodated, no payment is made for these contributions. However, because of the goodwill established with the staffers, this freelancer has no problems getting her feminist articles published on the features pages. She describes the key decision-makers on this paper as being "extremely conservative" though "chivalrous", which means that no special efforts can be expected from them to present the women's movement in the correct perspective.

She adds: "Though I have not been personally asked to tone down my writing, I do know for certain that women features staffers have to take a tough stand to push through a really hard-hitting article or an editorial."

Pointing out that feminist writing in the mainstream media helps to reach out to a larger readership, she feels that whether or not the public is getting "converted", certainly it is becoming more aware of the feminist viewpoint. In response to the emerging climate or thought, "the mainstream media too is keen

to use the writings of well-known feminists. May be the right thing is being done for the wrong reasons, but one can't over-emphasise the importance of the visibility of feminist writings in the mainstream media." She, therefore, stresses that it is not enough to write for the feminist media alone because then there is little chance of getting beyond the "already converted".

"Last year I had done an article on bride-killing in the state for another local daily. Though letters were not written about it to the editor, I was told personally by a large number of people, both men and women, that they found it relevant and informative."

But she acknowledges that the general reader would find ideological writings "too heavy" and that the already distorted image of feminism in the media gets aggravated by writings which are too polemical.

Interestingly, unlike regular staffers who find the feminist "label" counter-productive, this freelancer says: "I am very proud to be known as a feminist journalist because journalism for me is more than a career — it is an extension of my commitment to the feminist cause. I've almost given up writing on other topics so that I can concentrate better on writing serious articles on issues affecting women."

Seniority Matters... But Unity Helps

A survey by the Bombay Women and Media group throws more light on the implications of struggling within the system (Women and Media, 1986). A total of 39 women responded to the group's questionnaire, of whom 33 said that they objected to the use of sexist language like "eve, fairer/weaker/gentler sex, libbers, newsmen" etc. Only 18 had brought the matter to the notice of their editors or colleagues and received a mixed response.

Most of the respondents felt that they did have a special responsibility to ensure fair portrayal of women in their respective publications, but were not always successful.

"Their success depended on their seniority in the organisation and the type of work they did. While junior subs could (and did) 'spike' sexist copy (even that of seniors), junior reporters could only tackle the problem by writing responsibly themselves and choosing issues which otherwise would have been ignored. However, one junior reporter who had refused to obey her chief reporter's orders to interview a rape victim on 'how it was done', discovered to her dismay that a male reporter complied instead. Juniors therefore informally protested, though not too vocally, against what they found offensive, but with mixed results. They admitted their helplessness, especially one film journalist who pointed out the special culpability of film magazines in the sexist portrayal of women.

"What emerged was that it was not enough just to feel strongly and to protest: either you had to be in a senior enough position to effect changes; or you needed the vocal support of all your colleagues. Or at least of the women.

"In one paper all the women had jointly protested effectively against a nightclub advertisement before it was carried. In another case, an offensive photograph had drawn a protest from all the women on the newspaper and an apology from the editor. The news editor, however, who was responsible for the photograph being used, had reportedly referred to the women who initiated the move as 'frustrated spinsters'.

"But even those in senior positions had only moderate success. One editor of a magazine section said she had successfully objected to an advertisement — it was withdrawn after her protest — as well as to two supposedly humorous edits which were very sexist. No such edit has been written since.

Women Journalists Protest

The *Hindustan Times* of December 24, 1981 carried on page 3 an item titled 'Promiscuous IFS woman'. In it an unnamed IFS women officer was accused of "having several paramours, leaving her lawful husband to entertain himself with alcoholic beverages". Her courtship and marriage were termed a "quaint affair" and it was alleged that she was ashamed of her middle class husband and was trying to rise in her profession by giving in to the demands of MPs, chief ministers and senior officers.

Following objections, presumably from the Ministry of External Affairs, the newspaper published an apology on December 29, in which it disavowed any intention to insult women in general or the IFS in particular. No apology was made to the woman concerned. However, just below this apology, was another item titled 'Women's lib with a vengeance' which reported that a woman in Jammu had married several times and when asked why she did this, "retorted that she changed her husbands for personal pleasure".

Women journalists working for the *Hindustan Times* decided to take a stand on this issue. They got together and wrote a letter of protest to the editor of the paper. The letter described the apology as "objectionable in its wording and in its manner of display" and criticised the Jammu report.

The letter pointed out that the report on the IFS woman officer was not the responsibility of the correspondent alone. "It was presumably passed successively by the chief reporter, the news editor and the chief sub-editor. The editor is ultimately responsible for all that appears in the paper. We, journalists of the *Hindustan Times*, wish to strongly express our concern, opposition and anger that such objectionable and insulting reports should appear in this paper."

This letter was signed by several women and men journalists but the editor of the *Hindustan Times* refused to publish it.

— Report in *Manushi* No. 10, 1982

"It was in progressive magazines or those with an all-woman staff, or women's magazines, that senior journalists had been able to do a great deal by ensuring that women's issues or the women's viewpoint were adequately covered, and offensive photographs and items didn't get in."

References and Notes

1. Personal communications in response to my questionnaire.

Alter Egos
Tension Between Media Women and Activists

Given the radicalism of the women's movement and the pro-status-quo nature of the establishment media, conflict between the two is inevitable. But tension between activists and *sympathetic* media women is a different matter. Some of these were discussed at the 1985 Bombay conference with the idea of ironing out differences, understanding each other's constraints and working together with less mutual suspicion and greater harmony. This was a commendable initiative since both sides have valid points, and better rapport ought to be in their mutual interests as well as in the interest of the movement as a whole. For, although some of the tensions have the superficial appearance of being ego clashes, they are really a product of the built-in conflicts of the systems of functioning of the two sides.

Generally, media women find that activists often do not fully comprehend "professional" criteria for media coverage, the characteristics of existing media structures and the constraints of working within these.

Too Fussy?

To give an example: A journalist who has access to the features page of her paper, where she tries to increase the coverage of feminist issues, says she has problems convincing young and ebullient activists on the need to use language which is not intemperate. She recalls the instance of a piece on a self-defence workshop whose authors could not understand why she wanted the description of men as "the enemy" changed. She also comments that activist writers are "over-fussy" about choice of visuals, headlines, and editing of text matter, and they don't understand that some compromise is inevitable if they are to write for the mainstream media. "Being hypersensitive doesn't help."

As for subjects like obscenity and porn, she says it is best for activists *not* to write on these topics unless they have the opportunity to oversee the layout, etc. This does seem to be a pragmatic suggestion considering that activists, who have written on topics like obscenity in films, etc, have frequently found that male editorial staff have given a totally different presentation, contrary to the spirit of the article, by using out-of-context pictures, captions and headlines.[1]

Tricky Ground

Another problem is that being a professional media person, and also being required to meet the expectations of activist groups, can place a sympathetic journalist in a difficult position.

"Sometimes journalists are accused of capitalising on individual women's cases being handled by women's groups and going directly to the women, bypassing the group. Who should have the final say on when a woman's story can be told to the press — the woman herself or the activists helping her? The question was raised in the case of Shehnaz Sheikh, for instance." (FAOW-b, 1985) This is a clearly tricky question to which a media woman's answer would be quite different from the viewpoint of an activist group.

Another poser is whether journalists who are part of the movement should criticize a women's event or the activities of women's groups. A progressive journalist, who writes on a range of social issues, including the women's question, feels that at least in the present phase, where the movement is just beginning to gather strength, the mainstream media is not the appropriate forum for such critiques, which should be confined to the parallel "internal" media of the movement.

Professionalism vs. Loyalty

While this may be a sound policy as far as analytical articles go, it doesn't seem quite feasible where spot reportage is concerned, where there can be a conflict between ethical, professional norms of objectivity and intellectual honesty on the one hand, and loyalty to the movement on the other.

For example, one journalist mentions that her relationship with activist groups was strained for a while "after I wrote a report faintly critical of a Women's Day meet organised by one of them. They reacted with sharp letters to the editor though I still feel I wrote what I did sympathetically."

At the Bombay workshop media women stressed that even "concerned" journalists cannot be expected to abandon the honest objectivity which is part of their professional code. On their part the activists, while conceding that journalists have the right to express their opinion, said:

"Concerned journalists should not weaken the movement by writing in a generally hostile medium about inter or intra women's group politics. Also, if she *must* judge the movement at this fledgeling stage, she must take precautions not to hurt people's feeling or exacerbate the problems." (FAOW-b, 1985)

Towards Mutual Understanding

The following points which were recorded at the Bombay meet have been extracted from the Forum's report, (FAOW-a, 1985):

"Activists do not fully understand the constraints under which professional journalists work. Issues and events that are important to feminists do not always fulfil the criteria by which news is judged and published — topicality, proximity,

magnitude, etc. The press is not structured to promote causes, yet there are sympathetic individuals within the press who would like to help. However, few of them are in decision-making positions and have to operate within their own professional limitations of time and space. Women's groups should understand these and evolve some strategies. For instance, when news breaks, as in the Shah Bano case, some preliminary statement should be issued to the press, so that the feminist position is clear, and other voices do not dominate by default.

"Journalists are often made to feel like parasites, using the movement for stories and giving nothing in return. Activists don't realise that journalists are

Working Together

The following is an extract from a discussion between activists and media women in broadcasting during a conference in Bristol, UK in 1974:

Helen: Mary, is there any advice you could give to women who don't work in the media but who are active in the movement, as far as getting information across is concerned? Is it worth giving interviews to the press?

Mary: I'm not at all surprised that many members of the Women's Liberation Movement won't talk to the press, radio or TV at all. They have been so insulted, so denigrated. But somehow or other we've got to get over this, and I think the best way is to get on to your side women members of the staff. That's the first essential.

Tamar: Seek out people — even if they haven't solicited interviews — who you know are sympathetic. The women's centre to which I belong made sure that we all gradually got to know the local women's page reporters who have now all written very good stories on everything to do with our centre — and they have been around when we needed them for other things. Like when some of our members got arrested they were the only papers which reported it correctly.

Rose: There's another thing, if you're trying to talk about Women's Liberation as such, it's hopeless in a three-minute radio interview... whereas if you're talking about something concrete, like equal pay, or some action which you've started with a group of people, all the ideas you're talking about fit into everybody's frame of reference — and it seems it's then much easier to get across your information without distortion.

Cynthia: On protest...It always amazes people when they realise the power of one little letter. The BBC gets 5 letters — 5 cranks; 10 letters — 5 cranks, 5 ordinary people; 50 letters and they're quaking in their shoes. It's true, if they get 50 letters from all over the country, not just from one little group... they have their meeting the next day and they say "We must do something about this."

— from 'Real Alternatives: Women Organising in Media' (ISIS No.18, 1981)

not specialists...they have to approach different kinds of groups to communicate their ideas and concerns to the public."

Among the grievances of activists: Journalists often don't give credit to the source of their information, and activists giving interviews are unaware of the "slant" going to be given to the story.

"One solution is for activists to write more, to send information and research they consider important to sympathetic journalists, and to support the efforts of women journalists to cut down sexism in their publications."

This last point was particularly stressed by the Women and Media group at the workshop. They said that their internal battles against sexism in their own papers would be greatly strengthened if there was more support from activist groups "because those in authority are more concerned about outside criticism and need to be convinced that 'public opinion' is against the sexist content of their publications". (FAOW-b, 1985)

References and Notes

1. For example, Nina Kapoor of the Delhi media group refers to the distortion of her article on women in Hindi cinema with the use of lurid visuals in *Probe* (January 1984). Another piece by her on the same subject was "hacked up" in the *Weekend Review* with the then editor refusing to publish her rejoinder, despite her having "a verbal duel" with him. (Personal communication)

Unmet Needs
Feminist Media and the Movement

The parallel feminist media came into existence precisely because of the inadequacies of the mass media in disseminating information relevant to women and presenting the feminist perspective on a range of issues concerning women. Details about the different kinds of alternative media, both print and audio-visual, as well as adaptations of cultural art forms like cinema, theatre, song, and streetplay, etc are already available to feminist groups and need not be documented here. What is relevant to this study is the question: Do the existing feminist journals and newsletters meet the needs of the women's movement and, if not, what can be done about it?

When *Manushi*, the first feminist journal in this country, came into existence, it ushered in feelings of hope and celebration among progressives in different parts of the country. Here at last was a journal to fill the acutely felt void in the print media. *Manushi* has been, and continues to be, an important source of information and analysis, and an inspiration to those who, every year, come face to face for the first time with the feminist viewpoint.

Equally important, *Manushi* is today regarded with respect in establishment media circles too — its articles occasionally being reproduced in the general media or its editor sometimes being invited to contribute commentaries on important

current issues. It is, besides, a shining example of a journal which has successfully maintained its independence from advertisers and funding agencies, having survived entirely by the tireless efforts of its editorial collective and the loyal support of its readers. Unfortunately, recently the journal had to discontinue its Hindi edition but the English one is going strong and hopefully will, for many more years.

However, areas of conflict between *Manushi* and some activist groups reflect the existence of certain unfulfilled needs of the movement in terms of networking and also as a vehicle for theoretical debate.

This was one of the issues discussed during the December 85 conference in Bombay, where the role of movement journals was examined. It was noted that *Manushi* and *Feminist Network* (a news sheet) came into existence around the same time in the late 70s, but the later did not last long because it couldn't clearly identify its readers' needs. While *Manushi's* popularity reflects its rapport with its readers, over a period of time, there has been some disenchantment with it among some activist groups. At the Bombay workshop on communications, some ideas were outlined on the feasibility of starting a new journal to fulfil the unmet needs of the movement. The following is an excerpt from the report on this workshop (FAOW-a, 1985):

Why a new journal?

"Today most feminists feel ambivalent towards *Manushi*. While we are glad of its success, we are unhappy about its editorial policy...Internationally considered the voice of the Indian women's movement, *Manushi* is not closely associated with women's groups. Not only does it refrain from covering the activities of women's groups, it often uses its editorial power to attack other feminist activists, a practice which unfortunately goes unchallenged.

"As we are going to propose a new journal, we should understand what we mean by feminist principles.[1] The editors should not chop and change contributions arbitrarily, but should take care to preserve the author's style and ideas. Many feminists who contribute to *Manushi* feel upset to see their material substantially changed.

"We have not considered launching another journal because we felt it would be seen as competing with *Manushi*. The audience too would be largely the same. And we did not want to encourage the myth that women always fight.

"But there is a need and a place for a new journal. In the last five years, many regional newsletters have come up. We should find out what sort of response these newsletters have received, what problems they face, what functions they fulfil in a specific culture and language. Activists should express their views in such journals. Living as we do in different states, we can only meet once in a while, but we need to know what we are all thinking and doing. We should discuss how the new journal should be run and funded. Should it be published from different states? Could different groups take the responsibility to bring it out in rotation?"

A Charge of Bias

Though every issue of *Manushi* has some reportage on the activities of different groups and the issues they raise, as well as several pages of readers' views, the journal has been accused of ignoring, or not adequately covering, or being too critical of, the work of those groups with which it has had differences. There appears to be a distinct conflict between the journal's spelt out editorial policy and the *expectations* which activist groups have of it, *Manushi* being at present the only feminist journal with a nation-wide readership.

Manushi's Policy

Requested for her comments on these perceptions,editor Madhu Kishwar answers that *Manushi* is a "journal about women and society," and has "never claimed to be a vehicle for any movement, group or groups."[2] She points out

Spare Rib Looks Back

Any journal, of any progressive movement, is bound to attract some criticism from some of its readers and contributors. For example, one has come across letters in *Spare Rib* from writers objecting to the way an article has been cut or edited, criticising the stand it has taken on some issue or accusing it of going against the ideology of the movement. In fact one comes across such letters in every progressive journal, whether it is the *New Statesman* or the *New Internationalist* or *Mainstream* or *Economic and Political Weekly*.

The question is not so much one of giving perfect satisfaction to everyone in the movement, all the time, but of how receptive the editorial decision-makers are to different shades of ideological viewpoints and how willing they are to have their journal act as a voice of the movement by accommodating conflicting opinions within it and encouraging healthy and democratic debate.

In 1982, *Spare Rib* brought out a collection of articles from its back numbers, celebrating a decade of its existence. The following is an excerpt from the 'Afterword' to the book, written by the editorial collective, and taking stock of what they had tried to achieve through the journal:

"We wanted *Spare Rib* to take the women's liberation movement to women who had never encountered it, and involve them in it. We also wanted to be exciting and challenging for women already in the movement.

"*Spare Rib* aims to reflect women's lives in all their diverse situations so that they can recognise themselves in its pages. This is done by making the magazine a vehicle for their writing and their images. Most of all, *Spare Rib* aims to bring women together and support them in taking

that *Manushi* has published many articles with whose stand the collective does not agree; that the journal is *not* meant to be a bulletin for reporting and announcing seminars and conferences and all the activities of feminist groups (sometimes even seminars attended by members of the collective are not given coverage); if all such reports and items were to be accommodated, there would be little space in the magazine for anything else.

"We do publish reports of struggles waged by groups, but these are edited to a length commensurate with the significance of the struggle."

It should be noted that while some groups report that they have had problems with *Manushi*, others say that they have had none.

Lacuna Does Exist

Personally I feel that because *Manushi* has a policy of not publishing anything which has already appeared in the general media, and the few newsletters of the different groups do not have the same reach that *Manushi* has, a distinct void still remains.[3] (Both Saheli of Delhi and Women's Centre of Bombay publish a periodic newsletter; but neither is very regular and both reach only a limited audience. In Bangalore, Vimochana has a "street sheet" called *Krithi* which is locally circulated, has recently discontinued its Kannada bi-monthly, and brings out an occasional publication called *Sangharsh*.) Considering the many constraints under which such newsletters are published it would be unrealistic to expect them to fill the existing gap in dissemination of information.

It has often been pointed out that important reportage and analysis on feminist issues which are published by local editions of major newspapers do not reach women in other parts of the country. Such material needs to be reproduced in some sort of feminist newsletter which will circulate widely and reach women

control of their lives. If there is one thing that sums up that common vision, it is the letter which comes from Shropshire or Swansea or South London: 'I thought I was the only woman in the world who felt as I did until I read *Spare Rib*...'

"That letter arrives all the time. But of course there are problems too. In trying to stimulate a wide range of readers, do we settle for a blandness that satisfies no one? We're variously accused of being too lefty/not lefty enough, too man-hating/not man-hating enough, too parochial/too international or, most commonly of all, too internal to the women's movement/totally out of touch with feminist debate.

"However contradictory these criticisms may seem, we often find ourselves agreeing with all of them. Despite our need to produce a magazine which is fulfilling to us, as well as attractive and challenging to readers, we rarely feel totally satisfied. We know how complex the struggle for change has to be, on how many points, and over what a long period of time."

everywhere. This was a point stressed also by Bombay's Women and Media group at the December 85 workshop. Since neither *Manushi* nor the other newsletters can at present meet this need, perhaps one of the women's studies units, like the Centre for Women's Development Studies in Delhi or the SNDT University in Bombay should be approached for bringing out a new publication for this purpose. Not only articles, but many news items relevant to women need documentation and wider dissemination.

Support for Campaigns

Another lacuna lies in the area of networking to build up support for specific campaigns. For example, the campaign for the amendment of the rape law during the early 80s was taken up by women's groups all over the country and a tremendous role was played by *Manushi* in creating awareness about the actions taken up by different groups and in publishing analytical articles examining the issue in its theoretical and historical dimensions.

And yet, during the more recent campaigns, like the one against Net-En, the injectable contraceptive, and EP Forte, the drug misused for pregnancy testing, and even, to some extent, the campaign against female foeticide, revived again in 1986, *Manushi* has not fully played the role which the movement might have expected of it.

For example, in the Net-En case, though the journal did publish the news about the demonstration against the injectable at the Patancheru Primary Health Centre, and the press release about the petition in the Supreme Court, it has done little else.[4] If women's groups are to be involved in this campaign in an informed manner (and nationwide support is vital for success) they must be made aware of the many social, ethical and medical dimensions of this very complex issue and only a feminist journal can fulfil this need. Though the general media has indeed given coverage to the case, it has also distorted and confused it. (See chapter, 'Blind Spot')

What is interesting is that some of the complaints about *Manushi* seem similar to the complaints by the movement against the general media. To an extent this is bound to happen even in the case of any new journal that might be started because there never will be enough space for all the news and events and issues which different activist groups feel "need" coverage. Some selection, editing and cutting to make things fit, will be inevitable, and editorial decisions will have to be taken which will leave someone or the other aggrieved.

Therefore, not all the unmet needs of the movement can be fulfilled by the emergence of one or more new feminist periodicals though some needs certainly can be identified and met. Part of the solution must surely lie in more effective and simultaneous penetration of the general media, and the movement too is realising this as can be seen from the increasing number of activists turning writers and using the general media to serve their cause.

References and Notes

1. Collective decision-making with a non-hierarchial style of functioning is one of the objectives of feminist groups, whether the activity is bringing out a journal, or launching a campaign. During the Bombay workshop the experiences of a Marathi feminist journal called *Baiza* were also discussed. It was pointed out that though the journal began with a collective editorial team, the democratic structure was gradually eroded and the team later split up owing to differences on how to run the magazine.
2. Personal communication from Madhu Kishwar.
3. For example, when the media campaign against EP Forte was first launched in 1982, one expected to find detailed coverage on it in *Manushi*. According to a feminist doctor who was active in this campaign, an article she offered to *Manushi*, explaining the issue, was not published because it had already appeared in a Delhi newspaper. This was a pity because *Manushi's* national readership would not really have access to what one local daily publishes. Even though articles on EP Forte did appear in the nationally circulated news magazines, with the pressure on space and criteria like "newsworthiness" the general media does not always report on complex issues in sufficient detail or with a feminist perspective.
4. It is significant that the maximum debate on the Net-En controversy has appeared in the columns of *EPW*, not *Manushi*. In fact the entire issue of health and population control, which is an important topic for the women's movement today, has barely been discussed in *Manushi*, though some of the earlier numbers did have a focus on it.

V

THE AUDIENCE STRIKES BACK
Views from the Receiving End

Media sociologists have long ago rejected the earlier assumption that the audience is a "passive" mass which receives and swallows all media messages without discrimination. When we critique the media, we tend to forget the importance of trying to understand and assess how those at the receiving end view media content. And when we use the media we often don't pay enough attention to the need for being persuasive to the readership.

This section looks at this often-neglected aspect and focuses on: what people sympathetic to the women's movement feel about feminist writings; the responses of hostile readers; the fact that general audiences "read" media messages in a manner quite different from the way feminist critics look at these; and finally, what some feminists feel about some facets of feminist media and messages.

Over One's Head
Polemics and Jargon in Feminist Writings

Feminists writing in the mass media are trying to reach their ideas to a wider readership than is possible through the feminist media. How successful are they in communicating this outlook and *converting* people to their way of thinking? What do readers feel about the polemics and ideological jargon which tend to characterise feminist writings?

There are two aspects to this topic: one the response of those sympathetic to the movement and two, how those outside the movement, who do not subscribe to the feminist outlook, respond to feminist messages. This chapter deals with the first aspect.

I am not sure how much critical feedback feminist writers using the mass media get — or whether they have given much thought to this at all. Some comments from a cross-section of sympathisers might therefore be useful[1]:

Learning to Understand Jargon

An activist from a Bombay group (of men and women) working with slum dwellers says that information contained in feminist writings, especially about poor women, is useful to them in their work.

She says: "Jargon-filled phrases used to turn me off, simply because I didn't understand them... Now that I do (a little more!) I can wade through pieces to get at the essence. But it puts people off. How I have to struggle to convince others that *Manushi* is worth reading! I am one of the 'converted' so I will read feminist writings — but these concepts need to reach others, so it should be softer. Not soft in substance but in style. It should not be presumed that the lay reader makes the same assumptions. Things should be explained in clear, simple terms, related to people, to the middle class, so that it is not threatening.

"Also, one finds activist writers beating about the bush... case studies make a piece more interesting and credible than just an emotional outburst." Interestingly she feels that some feminist writing is "sensational" and says: "One should make a point but not go on and on."

Wider Context Ignored

A male activist from the national health movement (and a leftist himself) suggests that the charge of too-much-polemics-and-jargon would be more true of leftist writing than feminist ones— except perhaps, he adds, in book reviews! But he feels that feminist analysis sometimes remains narrow.

"In many pieces the broader dimensions of women's oppression are missing or only cursorily mentioned. For example dowry — the craze for money is as important a reason as patriarchy. Similarly, in the case of exploitation of women's bodies in advertising — the role of monopoly capitalism is just as important. But often feminist analysis reduces these problems simplistically to a mere domination by men." He also suggests that feminist arguments should give more importance to highlighting the fact that neglect of women's interests thwarts the transformation of society as a whole.

Ideology should be Intelligible

A progressive economist, associated with women's studies, begins by questioning whether most of the writing on women in the general media can be

called feminist at all. She also comments that it is not always interestingly written. However, she feels that public apathy to exposures of women's oppression should be seen as part of a general desensitisation on all social issues as a whole, not merely the women's question. Her comment is not an argument *against* writings on women but a pointer to the fact that the issue needs to be looked at in a totality and as part of a larger social background.

She says: "Women's situation cannot be dissociated from the type of society we have... this means that feminist writings should go beyond mere writings on women." (It may be mentioned here that this economist's study of the impact on women of land reforms in Kerala has shown how progressive measures can in certain situations actually make women's conditions worse.)

Far from objecting to ideological writing, she feels that there is not enough ideological discussion of issues. "But the style and language is important. It should not be ununderstable or alienating, nor should it be a dishonest juggling of words."

"Feminist Writings are a Source of Strength"

An activist from SEWA tells me: "I don't know whether it's the circles I move in, but I feel feminist writing in the general media has had a very significant impact. It has given those of us in the movement a lot of strength and inspiration and at times even a sense of solidarity and power — 'we are not alone'. It has made a lot of people stop in their tracks and think, even the 'unconverted', about what is happening around us.

"Regarding jargon and polemics, needless to say it does turn off many people, especially the 'unconverted'. Personally it no longer irks me (one is used to it perhaps), but I do find it unnecessary. Plus, if our goal is to reach out to all women and progressives and others, jargon is of little use. It only mystifies things — big words, convoluted arguments — and leaves the reader confused, exhausted and alienated."

Too Strident?

A feminist journalist says she finds some feminist writings excellent, some of it "preachy", while some of it needs to be less "strident". She admits that this last point could apply to some of her own writings too. On jargon, she points out it is not just difficult to understand, but also boring, and should be avoided, even in speech. "My editor at least switches off whenever I use jargon, so in my own interest I've learnt to put things differently."

Off-Putting

Another woman journalist who works on the Sunday section of a national daily says: "I personally do not fancy ideological writings. Many people don't, whether the subject is feminism or any other ism. It doesn't evoke a mass response."

Difficult Vocabulary

An English teacher working in a Delhi school, sympathiser but not activist, is representative of the sort of general reader who *would* like to know more about feminist issues but finds that feminist writings in their present form do not adequately meet this need. She is therefore *not* particularly motivated to read the large number of such articles which now appear in the media. After going through a sheaf of feminist articles supplied by me, she has made some interesting comments:

"Serious articles in journals like *EPW* seem to require two pre-requisites in readers: one, that they are already 'initiated' into feminism, and two, that have a very high proficiency in English, particularly in feminist phraseology." (Here she includes expressions like "sex-role stereotype"). They read like research papers, she says, and while they are objective and well-documented, they "use long sentences, heavily laden with clauses, and a very *dense* style which cannot often be understood without a second reading."

The newspaper articles she found more readable, being "less densely packed with difficult vocabulary and feminist jargon". But not readable enough because they make very serious reading and also presuppose some background knowledge which is not readily available. Sometimes the implication of the information given is not made explicit and the reader loses interest because it seems to be unrelated to her own condition.

She suggests that though the newspaper articles which are written in a conversational style are more persuasive, when they make certain extreme comments and generalisations they may antagonise not only male readers but also those women who are not yet part of the movement. One example she quotes of such language: "Faced as we are with greedy and cruel husbands... and their ingenuity in using women as a means of acquiring quick money..." which she felt was an exaggerated way of putting things.

Purple Prose

A male media commentator, sympathiser and progressive, writes that women activists critiquing the media tend to be "earnest, upright and accusatory, charging that the humiliation of women by the media is a devilishly planned affair". Quoting from the introductory article in the Kali Press book on *Women and Media*, he accuses its author of "purple prose".

"Surely she underestimates the people on her side, not all of them women. And she ought to remember that the male in Indian films is anything but authentic too." Welcoming the current enhanced coverage in newspapers on women's issues, he cautions that if the objective of feminist writers is to create a groundswell of public opinion, "these writers must surely write more tersely and attractively. Otherwise the converted may plod through their writings but not those who need to re-examine their views and prejudices."[2]

Time for Self-Evaluation

One must certainly acknowledge that not all feminist writing in the general media is polemical and filled with jargon but a great deal of it is. A lot of it is also dry, uninteresting reportage written in a colourless style. Doubtless, it is writings in serious journals like *EPW* which are more likely to be loaded with ideological jargon, but one assumes that this journal's rather intellectual readership has no problems understanding it. Even *EPW* readers, I rather suspect, might find themselves stymied by the kind of high-brow top-spin built into a recent article on Third World Women's Cinema:

"Language, form, the cinematic apparatus and so on are seen as enhancing or detracting from the effectiveness of expression, but are ultimately rendered transparent, for it is truth (even Truth) outside of representation that the artist is in pursuit of." (Whatever that might mean — at least three people whom I showed this to, including the English teacher, admitted that they didn't understand a word.)

(While working on this project and this particular topic, I did a look-through of some of my own writings on women's issues and was quite mortified to find some of them excruciatingly boring. I wish now that I had taken the trouble to say what I wanted to say more entertainingly and without a pressing compulsion to fill some of the pieces with endless facts and figures.)

There's no doubt about it — those of us writing in the general media must stop and take stock of what we are trying to say, to whom, and whether we are succeeding in our objective. One could certainly take a tip from some of the writers in journals like *Spare Rib* and *Ms*, whose lively style of writing is similar to the highly readable style that characterises general media writing in the West.

Probably this language-and-style problem in feminist writing is but an extension of the heavy, ponderous prose which is the hallmark of most journalistic writing in the English language media in our country, especially when the topics are serious and "message-oriented". All the more reason then, for feminist writers to put in that extra effort needed to make their own writings far more readable and persuasive than what appears in the rest of the media.

References and Notes

1. All personal communications.
2. 'Perpetuating Stereotypes' by Chanchal Sarkar, in the Sunday *Express Magazine*, May 26, 1985.

Deflected Messages
Audience Responses to Media Content

** "The Women's group at my college put on a play by a feminist theatre group in which a rape scene was depicted and it was clear that the meaning of the scene was very different for the feminists at the front and the men from the

rugby club who rushed in from the bar (laughing) when they heard what was going on. So the image itself, or the play, or whatever, might not be intrinsically sexist or feminist, it may depend on who is reading or receiving it and how they do so. The image itself may be ambiguous, at least partially open to different meanings we choose to construct upon it." (Barrett, 1982)

** In an article in *Manushi* on some street plays staged in Delhi on the issue of rape, the author expresses her unease over audience reaction:

"The people involved in making and acting the plays had put in a great deal of sincere hard work. But the question arises: what were these plays trying to convey to the viewer? How is it that the response of the male viewers was, at best, pity for the woman and at worst, open gratification when rape was acted out and a lot of amused sympathy for the rapists? Even more alarming was the uneasy giggling of the women viewers as if to deny that this could have anything to do with them."[1]

** After taking part in a street play on violence on women, one young student says she was quite unprepared to hear men in the audience using coarse language to applaud the wife-beating scene in the play.

The above are examples of deflected messages which show that an *intended* feminist meaning could be quite different from the meaning which different sections of the audience choose to perceive.

Pitfall of Forgetting the Audience

One of the problems of media critiquing is that one is so absorbed in analysing media content that one may overlook the need to assess how target audiences respond to this content. It can be a sobering experience to learn that audiences don't necessarily see things the way feminists do, and that what may be "sexist" or "feminist" to a radical viewer is not always seen the same way by the general audience.

This was already noted to some extent in the chapter on establishment responses to feminist critiques of the media. But the point of this chapter is to go further towards understanding how general audiences "consume" media content and what lessons this holds for feminists critiquing and using the media.

Let me clarify that this is *not* a defence of sexism in media messages on the ground that audiences don't perceive them as sexist. But if we wish to further the feminist cause by using the general media, we must have a sympathetic insight with what audiences look for in media content, how they respond and why.

Sociology of Audience Response

Media sociology has thrown up some important and frequently ignored facts:

** *Selective consumption* by the audience may mean that people often simply don't read all the feminist writings in the media— because they are not interested, it doesn't relate to their situation, the language puts them off, or it is too radical for their particular stage of receptivity.

** *Selective perception* may result in the audience not *receiving* an intended message or perceiving messages *not intended*.

The first point needs little elaboration. If we want to be read, we have to write more attractively, entertainingly, persuasively, convincingly. Enhanced media coverage on women's issues does not automatically imply that all of it is being absorbed by those outside the converted circle.

The second point is more complex and here two aspects are evident: a) Those who are hostile to feminism, who stand to gain from the present order, are bound to be non-receptive to the intended feminist message, choose to read it differently (as the examples cited at the beginning show), or react with hostility, and b) Messages which we critique as being sexist, or not feminist enough, or subverting the feminist theme, may, in some instances, be actually seen as "progressive" by general audiences. To take these two aspects in turn:

Hostile Responses

Hostility to feminist articles and pro-women government policies are a familiar feature of letters to editor columns. Women-and-law issues like the conjugal rights judgement or the AP government's amendment of the joint family property law evoked reactionary responses from male readers who have a stake in preserving traditional and patriarchal values.

When the question of maintenance to divorced wives and the issue of polygamy in Muslim Personal Law were hotly debated in the media, in the wake of the Shah Bano verdict and the Muslim Women's Bill, there were many letters from Hindu males suggesting that Hindu husbands too should be freed from the obligation of paying maintenance to divorced wives and that Hindu religion too gives men the right to polygamy.

A beautiful poem, 'Sita Speak', by Bina Agarwal in the *Express Magazine* (November 11, 1985), which must have spoken to the hearts of many women, drew a response from a male reader not only defending Rama's abandonment of Sita as a sign of his "extreme consideration" for the opinion of his people, but also giving his statement an air of authority by arguing that this was Morarji Desai's opinion too! (*Express* December 29, 1985).

Feminist Rejoinders

While hostility to feminist ideas from readers who are very much a part of the establishment is inevitable, what is worrying is the question: *how convincing and persuasive are the equally inevitable feminist rejoinders to these reactions*? Is any thought given to this?

A feminist reply in the *Indian Express* to a reader who dismissed "the Bhindranwales of feminism" as a bunch of frustrated divorcees and spinsters is an example which comes to mind. Going through it one felt that it would certainly be endorsed by sisters-in-struggle but one wondered whether the general audience would in any way be moved.

Sita speak

Sita speak **your** *side of the story.*
We know the other too well...
Your father married you to a prince,
told you to be pliable as the bow
in your husband's hand

Didn't you note Ram **broke** *the magic bow?*
They say you – the ideal daughter –
bowed your head in obedience
as you were sent away.

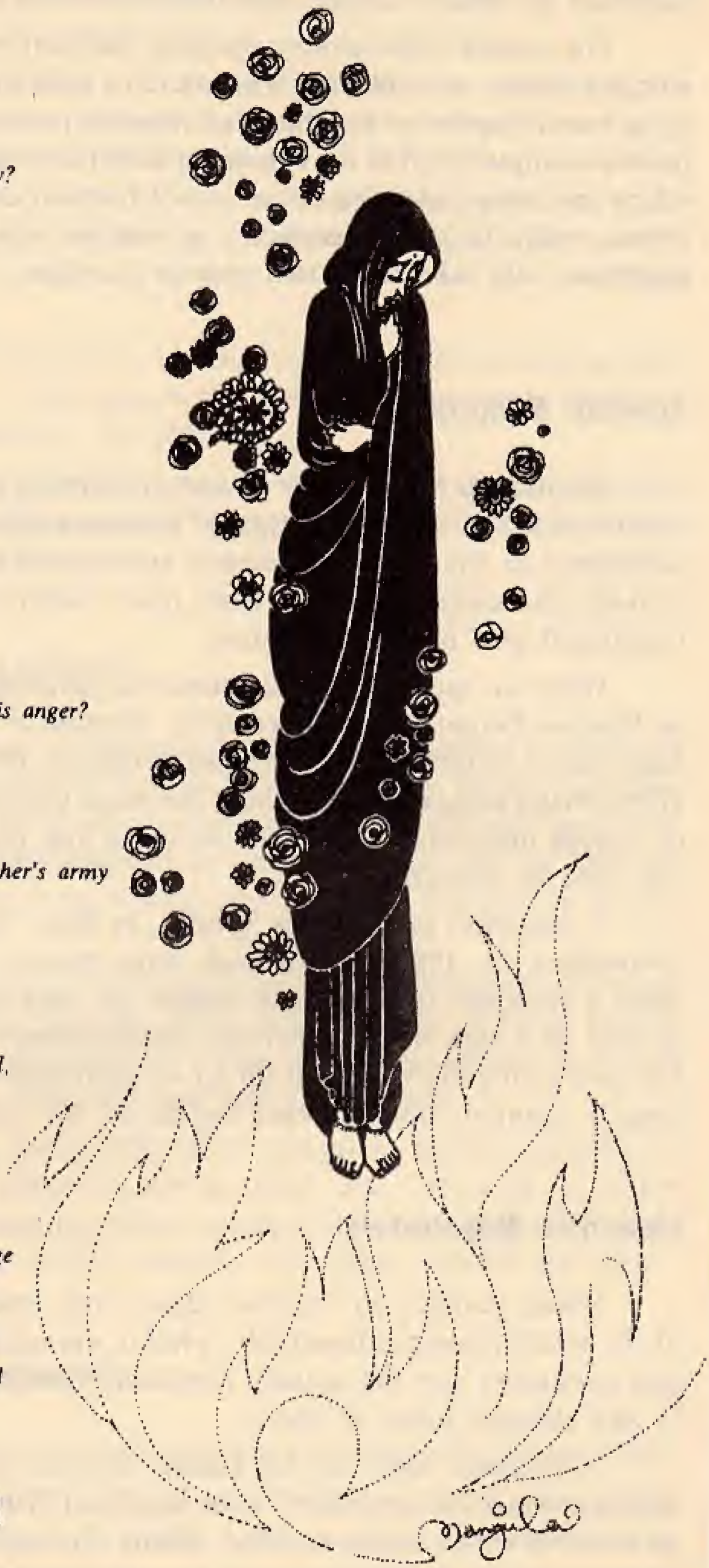
With your husband you chose exile;
suffered privation, abduction
and then the rejection –
the chastity test on the scorching flames
the victim twice victimised.

Could those flames turn to flowers
without searing the soul?
They say you were the ideal wife;
you questioned him not
and let him have his way.
Your brother-in-law, so quick to anger
on his brother's behalf,
left you, mother-to-be, alone
in the dark forest
without explanation or comforting word.
His brother's command!
Some citizens' demand!
Was injustice to a woman not worthy of his anger?
You, loving sister-in-law,
bore all in silence
and let him go away.

The sons you nurtured with such love
amidst nature and the wild woods –
sons with the prowess to challenge their father's army
were disarmed with a word.
Unhesitantly they joined him –
future rulers of his land.

Their lineage was accepted
yet your purity still questioned?
You, devoted mother, stopped them not;
bowing to the test, palms folded in farewell,
you bid the earth beneath to give way.
The poets who wrote your story
said: a woman is not worthy of hearing
the Ramayana; like a beast she is fit only
for being beaten.

Could such poetry ever bring you glory?
Yet they spoke their verses without challenge
and with such falsehoods got away.
Sita speak!
You who could lift the magic bow in play
with one hand
who could command the earth with a word
how did they silence you?



Bina Agarwal

The media constantly publishes readers' views attacking the women's movement, criticising women's groups, glorifying traditional values and dismissing feminism as "Western" and irrelevant to India. These items simply cry out for rejoinders but what use is it if we cannot design replies (to these reactionary statements) which are less emotional, more witty, less self-righteous and thereby score some genuine points?

Some years ago there was a long letter in a national daily from an activist group protesting against the consistently sexist contents of the women's page. Reading it I agreed in principle with all the points made but with another part of my mind couldn't help thinking that it sounded like a long and incoherent harangue.

If we are to tackle hostility to feminism from one section of the audience in such a way as to make our own viewpoint more acceptable to the rest of the audience, then we have to pay far more attention to the art of communicating far more convincingly and persuasively than we are at present doing. We can't afford to forget that we are speaking, not to each other, but to an audience whose support cannot be taken for granted.

Perceived Messages

The meanings which audiences read into different messages is the second aspect of the unpredictability of audience response.

During a symposium on women's cinema at the Hyderabad Film Festival in 1986, Vimochana of Bangalore narrated some of their experiences in discussing portrayal of women in cinema after screening a series of films for a slum audience. One example was significant:

The rape theme of a Hindi film, which the feminist group was highly critical of, was perceived quite differently by the audience who felt that the film did condemn rape and was therefore "good" — in contrast to the feminist criticism of the film as subverting the issue of rape.

Similarly in the case of TV soap operas like *Hum Log* and some TV programmes which have tried to show new images of women. Feminists and intellectual media critics have been harsh in their criticism, but popular responses have been different. Without denying the indisputable fact that audiences are conditioned to accept sexism as natural, the point is that some of the female characters in these programmes were indeed portrayed as exhibiting qualities of strength, rebellion, rejection of conventional norms, though never of course in so radical a manner as to alienate middle-class audiences. And viewers did appreciate the propagation of ideas which were different from the traditional fare they have so far been exposed to from the entertainment media.

The validity of a popular audience response versus a sort of intellectual snobbery on the part of radicals poses some uncomfortable questions for the movement.

Need to Understand Audiences

When we critique media content we tend to overlook the possibility that audiences may not necessarily be swallowing all sexist messages or accepting all

sexist images without discrimination. They may be having their own mechanism of absorbing the useful and the entertaining and rejecting at least some of the pernicious values. Besides, audiences not only read different kinds of meanings into media messages, they also derive different kinds of pleasure, even comfort, from media products, which the radicals and the intellectual critics don't try to investigate more deeply and sensitively.

In Britain for example, the soap opera *Crossroads*, widely panned by critics, was found by researcher Dorothy Hobson to "connect" with the experiences of thousands of women viewers. Quoting her study, another media analyst writes: "Dorothy Hobson's work is a salutary reminder of the importance of what has generally been missing from mass communication theories and traditional forms of media education: a sensitive exploration of the concrete responses to the media by real audiences. It is this absence which has contributed to one of media education's greatest strategic weaknesses: its generally negative and pessimistic approaches to popular media forms and their presumed effects." (Masterman, 1985).

A feminist writer quoting Hobson's work says that feminist critiques of mass media's images of women do not explore what these images mean to women and what women make of them.[2] And another feminist writer remarks: "How can

We make our own messages

Early media research relied on a "hypodermic model" by which media "injected" messages which are unquestioningly received by and influenced the audience. It was soon realised that audiences are not passive. As one analyst put it: "As in almost every other process of social interaction, the characteristic attitudes of the receiver 'interfere' in the process of receiving. We make things meaningful for us by fitting them into our pre-conceptions. They come to us raw and we dress and cook them. The standard term for the process is selective perception. We see what we wish to see and we twist messages around to suit ourselves."

This author quotes the "Mr. Biggott" studies as an example, in which an audience was shown a series of anti-prejudice cartoons featuring the highly prejudiced Mr. Biggott. Detailed interviews showed that about two-thirds of the audience clearly "misunderstood" the anti-prejudice intention of the cartoons. The researchers attributed the selective perception to the predispositions of the audience.

Those who were already prejudiced saw the cartoons as supporting their position. Even those who understood the cartoons found ways of evading the anti-prejudice "effect". Only those with a predisposition toward the message interpreted the films in line with the intended meanings of the communicators.

— *Image and Influence: Studies in the Sociology of Film* by Andrew Tudor, 1974

we widen the purchase of feminist ideas if we cannot understand why so many women read *Woman* and watch *Crossroads*?" (Barrett, 1982).

As I said, acknowledging the validity of audience response and trying to understand it can be a difficult issue for feminist critics, but it has to be faced if we are keen on using the media for the feminist cause. Michele Barrett argues:

"First, the 'sexism' or 'feminism' of particular works of art or images is not self-evident, or in any unambiguous ways, intrinsic to that work, but depends on how we read it... I am not disputing that an image or a text carries with it a dominant, or preferred, reading and that the relationship between the consumer and the work is one in which meaning is constructed within a particular range of options. But I want to suggest that this given range of meaning may serve to identify the issues at stake rather than determine an interpretation of them. The text may ensure that we read it in terms of sexual politics, for instance, but it cannot legislate against the reader drawing inferences that are the reverse of those offered by the text." (Barrett, 1982)

Messages Can Misfire

In the Indian context one may recall the controversy over the TV serial *Subah*, which was on the theme of drug addiction. One school of thought among viewers was that the serial exposed and condemned an evil and was therefore "good", while another opinion, equally strong, was that the serial was "bad" because it exposed youngsters to the temptation of trying drugs.

Another example is the media focus on female foeticide. One unforeseen and unintended fall-out was that many who were unaware of the use of amniocentesis to detect feotal sex now came to know of the technique and wanted to know where to get the test done! This was despite the fact that most of the writings on female foeticide condemned the practice and called for government action to stop it.

Audiences Want Entertainment

Audience expectation of entertainment values in media products tends to be forgotten by serious activists whether leftist or feminist. Over a period of time,

Bound to be boring?

"I think the real problem with women film-makers is that they feel it is their duty or a compulsion to make a feminist comment. Just as every 'serious' film-maker feels it is his responsibility to make some 'social comment'. No wonder their films are so boring and pedantic."

— A reader's comment
in *Deccan Chronicle*,
August 2, 1987

an overdose of ideological, *polemical* and "socially relevant" media programmes and writings become hard to consume and difficult to digest. As one media commentator puts it: "Most mass media content dealing with serious issues is so deadly dull that many who should listen or watch turn off the message."[3] There is also the tendency to concentrate on the negative, gloomy side to the exclusion of everything else — as will be seen in the next chapter.

References and Notes

1. "Strengthening the 'Strong-Man-Helpless-Woman' Stereotype" by Ruth Vanita, *Manushi*, No.5, 1980.
2. *The Sociology of Women* by Sara Delamont, 1980.
3. 'Development Support Communication and Its Application to the Caribbean' by Everold Hosen in *Caribbean Women in Communication for Development: Report of a Workshop*, 1975.

A Look Inwards
Feminists on Feminist Media & Messages

** "Women in India do have a hard time but there are also a lot of good things happening in India for women. It is a pity you always focus on the difficult and negative side and do not put in the more positive. I find the magazine is often very depressing and gives no hope. If we do not have hope we cannot accomplish anything."

—Letter in *Manushi* No. 31, 1985

** "Right now *Manushi* reads rather like a documentary entitled 'Woe, Thy Name in Woman'. While these problems we face are very real, I am sure you will agree that for a magazine to be truly meaningful, there should be equal treatment of both negative and positive aspects of the status of Indian women."

—Letter in *Manushi* No. 10, 1982

One of the criticisms of the feminist media is that it dwells too much on the gloomy side and fails to fulfil the role which people, even feminists, look for in media: that of providing inspiration and hope — and if possible, entertainment too. The charge that feminist journals tend to be full of woe does not come only from those outside the movement but also from time to time from feminists themselves. The above two letters are an example, for they come from loyal readers who support the magazine and the women's movement.

Some years ago, *Manushi* itself had criticised a women's calendar, brought out by a Bombay group, as being full of negative stereotypes. Suggesting that such a calendar ought to be something to hang up on a wall as a source of daily

Criticism or Glorification ?
—it's not clear

Strengthening Oppressive Stereotypes

One of the few determined actions shown by a woman ! That too historically incorrect. Since when have women been allowed to light funeral pyres ?

Auspicious start to the new year
Entry for January 1

Such contempt for ourselves—women shown enjoying their oppression

Visuals in the Women's Calendar critised by Manushi

inspiration, with positive images of women's struggles, the journal expressed disappointment that this calendar presented one negative visual after another. (*Manushi* No.7, 1981)

Difficult and Delicate

The problem is undoubtedly difficult and delicate. The feminist media, by seeking to focus on serious and often depressing issues, aspects and events, which are glossed over or ignored by the general media, *often ends up by focusing on nothing else*. Much like the contemporary Indian art cinema with its over-worked formula of villainous landlords and oppressed bonded labour, presenting reel after reel of unrelieved misery, feminist media too, over a period of time, has fallen into the same rut.

There is no denying the fact that feminist readers do begin by responding enthusiastically to feminist media, for giving them all that the mass media doesn't, but there comes a saturation point when many begin to feel that they've had their fill for the moment. And any further descriptions of women's oppressions can now be taken as read.

I'm sure many feminists who are not exactly full-time activists would agree with the comment made by the editor of a Punjabi magazine, *Shackles and Women*, during the December 85 Bombay conference, that movement journals seem to be filled with stereotyped reports on atrocities and so on, which are of interest only to activists. (FAOW-a, 1985)

Feel the Reader's Pulse

Interestingly, feminist media may sometimes provoke the same sort of criticism from feminists which the general media does. (This was partly touched upon in the chapter 'Unmet Needs'.) For example, I've seen occasional letters in *Spare Rib* protesting against: the way an article was cut or edited; the use of "objectionable" cartoons; even accusing the journal of perpetuating sexist stereotypes! I recall also a letter in an early issue of *Manushi* (No.4, 1980) suggesting that some of its illustrations of women were "obscene" because they conformed to "a male view of female anatomy"! Just as no mass media journal can take for granted the responses of its readers, obviously feminist media too needs to be in close and constant touch with the expectations of its loyal feminist readers.

Defining the Feminist Perspective

A third point in the feminist response to feminist media is the debate over what exactly can be defined as feminist. While this is an extremely knotty question where entertainment media like cinema is concerned, it applies also to print, particularly visuals. When is a depiction of "reality" acceptable as a feminist comment, and when is it simply "negative" portrayal?

In the women's calendar earlier mentioned, there were sketches showing how women are oppressed and this was described by *Manushi* as strengthening oppressive stereotypes. And yet, when we *verbally* and in writing describe these incidents or situations, we don't seem to consider it as stereotyped. Personally, I find it very difficult to draw a distinction and judge whether a cartoon is "exposing" an evil or "condoning" it. Whether it is "satire" or "poking fun". Obviously, as seen in the chapter on 'Deflected Messages', it depends on the predisposition of the viewer. Apart from the more blatantly sexist cartoons where there is no doubt whatever as to what the intended message is, "readings" of many visuals may well be determined by *where* the visual appears or who has drawn it. If I see it in a feminist journal or calendar or whatever, I might be predisposed to understand the artist's intention as being sympathetic and well-meaning. (See 'Tailpiece' in 'It's One Big Joke'.)

Controversy Over Feminist Cinema

During the 1986 Hyderabad Film Festival, at the symposium on women's cinema, there was debate over what *is* a feminist film. There was some feminists who felt that *Subah*, *Phaniyamma* and *Paroma* are not feminist at all. While others disagreed. (This problem gets aggravated by the establishment tendency to club everything on women and by women in cinema and other areas, as feminist.)

It was obvious during the symposium that there is no "correct" feminist line in defining a film this way or that — different kinds of viewers hold different

Getting "labelled": an author's view

The following is an extract from a 1971 preface by Doris Lessing to her book *The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1962 and instantly "labelled" in a derogatory way as feminist. In this preface Doris Lessing describes the psychological themes of her novel, the issue of "breakdown" and the fact that sometimes when people "crack up" it is a way of self-healing, etc. This central point, she feels, was missed because of the overall reaction that her book was trying to propagate a "feminist" message. She writes:

"But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war.

"I have been in a false position ever since, for the last thing I have wanted to do was to refuse to support women.

"To get the subject of Women's Liberation over with — I support it, of course, because women are second-class citizens, as they are saying energetically and competently in many countries. It can be said that they are succeeding, if only to the extent they are being seriously listened

shades of feminist opinion, and react differently to films on women regardless of whether the film-maker is male or female. One view at the festival was that many of the films by women in the women's cinema section were not feminist at all while some, by both men and women, in the other sections, were in fact feminist in tone and message.

Hard to Please

A film which is not "overtly" feminist, but which makes a strong statement, and also entertains, runs the risk of being decried by the radicals in the movement. In a recent collection of articles on women's cinema, one commentator naming a spate of recent Hollywood films with a central female protagonist, says: "While some women have given a cautious welcome to these films, arguing that they

to. All kinds of people previously hostile or indifferent say: 'I support their aims but I don't like their shrill voices and their nasty ill-mannered ways.' This is an inevitable and easily recognisable stage in every revolutionary movement: Reformers must expect to be disowned by those who are only too happy to enjoy what has been won for them...

"But this novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation. It described many female emotions of aggression, hostility, resentment. It put them into print. Apparently what many women were thinking, feeling, experiencing, came as a great surprise. Instantly a lot of very ancient weapons were unleashed, the main ones, as usual, being on the theme of 'she is unfeminine, she is a man-hater.' This particular reflex seems indestructible. Men — and many women — said that the suffragettes were defeminised, masculine, brutalised. There is no record I have read of any society anywhere when women demanded more than nature offers them that does not also describe this reaction from men — and some women.

"A lot of women were angry about *The Golden Notebook* because the number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with, is still small...

"Some books are not read in the right way because they skipped a stage of opinion, assume a crystallisation of information in society which has not yet taken place. This book was written as if the attitudes created by the Women's Liberation movement already existed.

"It came out first ten years ago in 1962. If it were coming out now for the first time it might be read and not merely reacted to...

"I was so immersed in writing this book that I didn't think about how it might be received... emerging from this crystallising process, handing the manuscript to publisher and friends, I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said could change that diagnosis."

do indicate shifts in definition and representation of femininity, others have been particularly angered, feeling that political ideals have been exploited to promote fashionable and profitable entertainment."[1]

A West German feminist film-maker, in an interview to the *Telegraph* (November 19, 1982) says of a character in one of her films, who makes hard and bold decisions, "there is so much we can learn from Irena — but the intellectual feminists don't like this approach." (The character here decides to walk out of her marriage but later has a relationship with another man, whereas the radicals would have liked to see her remain independent.)

"Cultural Politics"

On the one hand, entertainment values may be regarded as diluting the feminist message. On the other hand, any pleasure derived from entertainment which has no pretensions to being feminist may be seen as a sort of ideological betrayal! Calling it a question of "cultural politics", Michele Barrett writes:

"Mass media is often seen as inescapably locked with an illusory construction of pleasure, pandering to reprehensible tastes and values in an audience... leading to a 'moralistic purism' on the part of the *avant garde*. The question of pleasure is a particularly provoking one. In cultural politics it frequently surfaces as an irritant: *Why* do people enjoy things that are politically bad for them? Among feminists the problem is often acute. What is the nature of the illicit pleasure 'she' takes in a happy ending? Why do we still take pleasure in fashion magazines or the dashing exploits of male heroes, or lyrical love songs, or blatant sentimentality? What meaning can we attach to these pleasures and our ambivalence about them?

"The response of feminist critics and aestheticians has often been tinged with, not to say predicated upon, a form of moralism. No feminist could enjoy a book by Barbara Cartland or Norman Mailer, and if you do, then so much the worse for your feminism. Is your pleasure in Garbo or Fonda politically correct? Does it rest on the extent to which, for their time, they express a feminist point of view? Or something not so worthy?" (Barrett, 1982)

New "Stereotype" of Feminism

To the above may be added the fact that the feminist movement and media have unwittingly become responsible for the creation of a new feminist stereotype which can be as disturbing as the mass media's stereotype of the "ugly sisters". Perhaps even more problematic because while we can disdainfully dismiss the latter we often feel unwillingly compelled to live up to the former.

I am reminded here of how a feminist friend sheepishly, and almost guiltily, acknowledged that she never missed *Buniyaad* if she could help it. It may have been difficult for her to admit this in the presence of a larger group of hard-core radical activists because enjoying *Buniyaad* is not ideologically correct!

The point is: Why do we, who are not for a moment going to be influenced by the stereotypes and conservative values propagated by soap operas, feel embarrassed to take pleasure in popular media forms for their entertainment-story-

aesthetic values? In *Buniyaad* for example, at least the earlier episodes presented a fine understanding of, and attention to, cultural and historical detail. Must we deny the fictional, imaginative and artistic dimensions of mass media products even while we critically view their ideological content?

Tailpiece

Many feminists resent the fact that all their opinions and values are expected, by those within and outside the movement, to fall into a certain specified slot. I for one very much identify with the following account in Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage (1981)*:

" 'I am suffering from feminist fatigue', writes Lynda Hurst, a columnist on *Toronto Star*, in a new non- or anti-feminist sheet started in Canada in June 1980 called *Breakthrough*. 'After the last dazzle of the (feminist) fireworks, there was deeper darkness. You are perhaps more enslaved now than you have ever been,' she says defiantly.

'I've been letting sexist cracks slip past with barely a shrug. I haven't read *Ms* magazine in months. I can sleep nights without worrying about my lack of a five-year career plan. I can even watch *I Love Lucy* re-runs without tsk-tsking over the rampant sexism of the Ricardo marriage.

'Don't get me wrong. It's not the women's movement I'm fed up with... It's the "feminist" label —. and its paranoid associations — that I've started to resent. I'm developing an urge to run around telling people that I still like raindrops

Second Thoughts

"Ten years ago I used to write a column called *Agar Socha Jain To* (If we think) in *Manorama*, a Hindi magazine, in which I took up issues such as the attitude of women who, for an example, while cooking only call upon the daughter to help and not the son. Strangely enough, this column provoked a lot of reaction from men who complained that it started arguments in their homes. One writer, describing a family argument scene, even had a male character taunting his wife: 'Go and read Mrinal Pande's column.' At the time I enjoyed the controversy and wanted to write as an angry young woman, but today I feel that there is no point in needling people. I want to write and project in my magazine, such work as will create harmony, even at the risk of being criticised, as I am sometimes now, for not projecting issues with sufficient belligerence. But I genuinely think we can win our point better by a cool, composed tenor of voice, rather than one that is strident."

— Mrinal Pande, until recently editor of a Hindi women's magazine, *Vama*, during a panel discussion (*Samya Shakti*, 1985)

on roses and whiskers on kittens, and that being the local easy-to-bait feminist is getting to be a bore.

'I'm tired of having other people (women as well as men) predict my opinion on everything from wedding showers to co-ed hockey...

'I don't want to be stuck today with a feminist label anymore than I would have wanted to be known as a "dumb blonde" in the fifties. The libber label limits and short-changes those who are tagged with it. And the irony is that it emerged from a philosophy that set out to destroy the whole notion of female tagging.' "

References and Notes

1. Extracts from the book *Films for Women* (edited by Charlotte Brundson) were published in *Sunday* December 21, 1986. The editor of this collection of articles points out that "feminism is controversial" and "it would be problematic for a cinematic institution whose products are directed at a politically heterogeneous audience overtly to take up positions which might alienate certain sections of that audience."

VI

THE GREAT SPIN-OFF
When the Media Rides the Feminist Wave

The concepts of feminism and liberation are today being co-opted by the most unlikely sections for their own purpose. Women's magazines stick to their old formula fare but now also have a "slot" for propagating feminist ideas. A government medium like television takes up the women's question but allows the old sexist images to remain side by side. Advertisers use variations of the liberation theme to sell their products and to boost their own image.

While acknowledging the validity of the feminist critique of the bandwagon phenomenon (about which much has already been written in the feminist media), this section also takes a look at a related question: can this phenomenon be used to the advantage of the movement?

Feminist writers now realise that the traditional women's magazine could be used as a channel for reaching readers who are not reached by the feminist media. Government's stated policy on women could be exploited by feminists by helping to make meaningful programmes for television. Nothing can be said in defence of advertisers jumping on the feminist bandwagon, but public-interest advertising focusing on women's issues *can* serve a purpose, even if the motives of the advertisers may be dubious.

Soft-Sell
The Case for Women's Magazines and Pages

> "The women's page and the Women's Programme of the electronic media have come under much fire with the heightened consciousness of the Women's Liberation Movement. Women editors have been accused of keeping their sisters oppressed by feeding them with recipes, beauty and diet regimens, fashion features and generally the type of articles that keep women bound in a cocoon of femininity..."
>
> — From a Report on the Caribbean Workshop on Communication, 1975

The feminist critique of the traditional fare offered by women's magazine and pages is well-known and valid. Today the conventional women's magazines also peddle feminist ideas, along with the old mix of beauty, cookery and romance, in much the same way as the general media is filled with a combination of feminist and sexist images. The new women's glossies like *Flair* and *Savvy*, somewhat like their Western counterpart *Cosmopolitan*, have serious articles on feminist issues

Do the Glossies Gloss over Feminism?

The following is an extract from an article by Anna Karpf published in the 'Media' column of the *New Statesman* (November 1, 1985). It is a response to an article in an earlier issue (October 25) about the new women's magazine started in Britain and which, the authors had argued were "appropriating" the space opened up by feminism but were "minus most of the politics". In this article, the author suggests that the new glossies do have a useful role to play. She writes:

"At the *Spare Rib* relaunch, novelist Zoe Fairburn recalled that in the far-off 1970s people were chastising *Spare Rib* for being extreme, but now no women's magazine is untouched by the issues *Spare Rib* and the Women's movement campaigned for.

"It's true: most women's magazines now carry a health page, with information, advice and campaign news. Even *Elle's* first issue includes three articles with a whiff of feminist thinking, including a good one on the inadequacies of health education as against the social and economic causes of illness.

"And many of the women interviewed in the feminist press are also now covered by the women's pages and women's magazines. They may be featured in a tokenist way, or as individuals abstracted from social movements, but at least they're here.

"The influence hasn't only been one way. The feminist press is no longer proudly scruffy: the new *Spare Rib* brought in a designer from *The Face* to help them fashion a new image. There's also a tilt at the

nestling incongruously with a spurious and glamourised version of "liberation" — this marks the new women's magazines from the older ones like *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*.

And yet, despite the movement's criticism of the women's magazines and pages, two new factors also have to be recognised: one, feminist journalists working on these magazines/pages and feminist writers writing for them are trying to disseminate feminist ideas to women readers who are not exposed to the feminist media. And two, activists in the movement too have begun to consciously *use* these magazines and columns as a way of spreading consciousness.

What then is the case for women's magazines and pages in the present stage of the women's movement?

colour supps. In a 'light-hearted series of short articles called Feminist Bedrooms'. Light-hearted may be, but also an acknowledgement that feminists don't live by struggle alone, and you don't have to be a yuppie to have upwardly mobile dreams.

"But does any of this disprove the notion that the glossies are cultural feminism minus the politics? Certainly until recently many socialist and/or feminist women have been closet women's magazine readers, slipping their copy of *Cosmopolitan* beneath their *Guardian* or *Practical Computing*, convinced that they're ideologically incorrect escapism, trivia incarnate. They flog anorexic images of women, make us feel terrible about our spots or flagging libido; they merchandise capitalism, and make black women and lesbians invisible.

"Or so goes the critique. And it's true, but it isn't the whole truth. Women's magazines aren't just propagators of the slick and the trivial, with the odd nod to the serious, and in accusing them of this, we risk seeing them with male eyes, and ignoring their contradictions.

"Women's magazines also make space for subjects ignored by the male agenda of newspapers (or squeezed into the women's page). They take seriously relationships, emotions, vulnerabilities and the minutiae of domestic life, unlike most 'quality' papers which think that important subjects take place in the House of Commons, the Stock Exchange and the UN, and not the kitchen, the shops or the nursery. (Though women's magazines also talk employment and welfare.)

"It's true that women's magazines eschew phrases and concepts like patriarchy, social relations, oppression. But they address women who say 'I'm not feminist but...' and then speak feminist ideas.

"It's also true that given their special and economic origins, as the product of capitalist corporations, glossy magazines aren't going to be really subversive, or commit themselves to a programme of political change. And yet, as a journalist who writes for women's magazines (I don't defend them because I write for them, I write for them because

It has to be admitted that while the overall feminist critique of these magazines has its points, the soft-sell strategy of using this medium has its own relevance. Besides, it is important to appreciate the efforts made, and problems faced, by feminist journalists who are trying to change the style and content of the conventional women's magazines. Important also to recognise the specific reader-needs they are trying to fulfil. The observations of the two senior journalists working on the two oldest English language women's magazines in this country are relevant here:[1]

I can defend them.), I know that I've been able to raise feminist issues in glossy magazines that I'm unable to anywhere else, including the *New Statesman*.

"And so, while it's good that women's magazines are subjected to a rigorous critique, we shouldn't reproduce the idea that they're mainly about knitting patterns and having another orgasm. They also carry serious articles questioning oppressive orthodoxies, and campaign on women's behalf. The invisibility of women and the display of women's bodies in the national press is a fitter target for our anger."

In Her Own Right: This is an extract from a letter to the editor, published in the same issue of *New Statesman* from three members of the *Everywoman* co-operative, expressing surprise that the article on women's magazines in the October 25 issue had failed to mention their own newly started one. The writers state:

"Ever since *Everywoman* was launched nine months ago, we have been bridging the gap between the two traditional markets of the big budget women's glossies and the 'right-on' feminist publications with their currently limited circulations...

"*Everywoman* has shown that it is possible to break those two mutually exclusive moulds and has reached a wider based audience of women, thus reflecting the changing experiences and expectations of all women. We have proved that you can produce a good magazine on a remarkably small budget. The readers are there, sick to death of non-stop consumerism, and 'how to get your man'. As our daily postbag indicates, they respond eagerly to our lively, informative, non-prescriptive approach and it's the readers from whom we take our cue.

"We know that *Everywoman* is important in influencing other publications. A provincial newspaper has admitted to lifting our ideas and angles and a local paper is modelling its newly acquired women's page on *Everywoman*. Advertisers have shown a marked interest in our readership, looking to define the 'real' woman of today — the women they are finding it difficult to reach. We are delighted because we want not only to fulfil the needs and desires of our readers but also to influence the press as a whole..."

Making Feminist Topics Palatable

One journalist says that her attempts to increase coverage of women's issues with a feminist perspective were "initially well-received but soon it kind of bombed at the box-office". Issues of the magazine which covered serious feminist themes like "effects of drugs on women" and "an appraisal of the Women's Decade" did not go down too well and many copies were returned unsold. "Soon pressure started coming from the advertisement department about the profile of the magazine and whether it is a saleable one."

This journalist points out that though she herself is involved in the activities of local women's groups, this "cannot necessarily be reflected in the magazine". (Though there is no hard-sell of feminist ideas in this magazine, one does find many feminist issues written about in its pages, including occasional snippets from foreign feminist journals, comments on media images of women, etc.) As she says: "We do try and give coverage in as popular a way as possible to issues like discrimination against female children, conditions of women prisoners, how influential lawyers take up anti-women cases, etc."

On women's pages in the dailies she feel their utility depends on how such pages are exploited. "Most male editors are coming around to the view that a women's page should be a judicious blend of serious writing and 'traditional' features like cookery, etc. Earlier they would have opted only for the latter." This, she points out, is a step forward, and names two evening papers in Bombay as examples of this changed perspective.

On reader reactions she comments that readers do not form a composite block and so the reactions are diverse. "Radical feminist writing or writing which is perceived as 'heavy' does put off readers of our magazine — as the letters we receive (or in some cases *don't* receive) illustrate. Though many readers do

write in objecting to overtly 'feminine' themes, they are in a minority." She recalls that a special issue on 'Beauty and Make-up' did evoke letters of protest but the fact is that this issue was totally sold-out within a week of its appearance!

Soft-Sell is an Important Tool

Another senior journalist on another English language women's magazine mentions the many topics she has written about — human interest stories on "everyday" heroines — which would neither have got sufficient coverage nor prominent placement in the general media.

She says: "I enjoyed doing these stories because they featured individuals or projects that would indirectly inspire people to take up some change-making activity within their own environment. And the feedback I received convinced me that this soft-sell was a valuable tool that can be used more effectively than a do-or-don't feminist code."

An attempt to change

A case study of an English magazine by the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, Bombay, has brought to light the painstaking effort of a part of the all-women staff of a commercial women's magazine. Instead of changing the format, these women decided to put some new wine in old bottles. Consequently the nature of short stories began to change, non-staff counsellors started giving unorthodox advice on marital and related problems. The change even reached the culinary features and the idea that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach was replaced by a more matter-of-fact approach to cooking, keeping in view the time and needs of a modern woman's life. Even humour at the cost of women was curtailed.

Several new columns showed up. The study says: "One picked out news items relating to women from daily newspapers to focus readers' attention on what (good and bad, though mostly bad) was happening to women everywhere. Another looked at that eternal and unisex favourite — the Hindi film — and analysed new releases from a feminist perspective. A third reviewed books by, for and/or about women, while another discussed personal law from the women's rights point of view. One column attempted to demystify mechanics through simple and practical explanations of how things (like household gadgets, home electrical and plumbing systems, cars and two-wheelers) worked. Another highlighted women's achievements in sports. A non-sexist, non-ethnic, non-communal, and in other ways non-offensive humour column was introduced."

All of it was being directed at making middle and upper-middle class readers aware of how other women, especially those on the lower rungs of the class hierarchy led their lives, their concerns and their problems,

She adds: "A lot of small-town readers, whose scope for self-expansion is so much more limited, look upon a women's magazine as their window on the world. I have, over the years, collected many letters from agonised, confused or grateful women who have drawn courage or guidance from communicating and corresponding with the magazine." At times the correspondence has lasted over months and resulted in friendships. Others have visited the office to share their sorrow and to gain confidence, to seek help and counselling, because they feel a women's magazine "cares".

This journalist admits that this responsive attitude of readers — of a women's magazine being their friend and on their side — has not been fully utilised by the decision-makers, and that the campaign for change has not been consistent. (In fact, at the time of writing this particular magazine is trying to tread a "trendier" path and thereby presenting a dubious image. The difficulties of committed media

and often their own role in the oppression of fellow women. Besides, issues with which the readers could identify themselves were also given prominence through features discussing topical, social and at times even political issues so that readers not addicted to newspapers could be up-to-date with the news.

But the efforts soon faced concerted resistance from the management, especially when the staff tried to move into areas "not traditionally thought of as women's issues". For example, in 1978, when widespread labour unrest in Bombay had become a major national issue, a two-part feature was planned to present the issue from both points of view — representatives of managements and organised workers were interviewed. The articles were ready for the press, when they were scuttled: the management felt that they did not belong in a women's magazine.

A 'watchdog' column designed to draw attention to infringement of democratic rights was at first agreed to but later cancelled for the same reasons. An annual analysis of the Union Budget was abruptly stopped after the first in the series had appeared. Even women's issues that were subject to controversy were censored. An assigned article on the struggle against sexual segregation in a college run by the Bohras, which was adversely affecting the education of both boys and girls, was not published because an old timer on the staff suggested to the management that it would infuriate the Syedna and cause trouble for the magazine.

Gradually the magazine swung back to its traditional text, spiced with sexist humour and recipes for *murq massalam*. The lack of numerical strength of the pro-changers also contributed to this failure, but it is a moot question whether they could have carried out the changes if they had been more in number, whether the commercial interests of the journal would not have ultimately prevailed over the women's cause.

— extracted from: 'They Can't Have Their Say' by Anjali Despande, *Mainstream*, December 4, 1982

women working under such image-making directives from male, managerial decision-makers can be imagined.)

However, the point stressed by the journalist from this magazine is that periodicals like the one she works for have the potential to reach those women whom magazines like *Manushi* don't, and therefore should be used as a vehicle for the feminist message, even if it has to be "sugar-coated". Defending the stress in her type of magazine on topics relevant mainly to urban women, she points out that in an English language journal it is irrational to have too much on the rural theme which can be focused on only periodically.

Considering the very critical attitude of feminists toward women's magazines, this journalist says that although these magazines may not have any role in their own lives, they do mean something to many other women. And she suggests that ideally women activists should "meet us half-way to reach out, with this powerful tool, to a 'needy' section of an audience, which is more open to changes than is generally believed."

Uses of Women's Pages

What do women journalists not working on women's magazines and pages feel about these columns?

One woman, who herself writes on feminist issues in the general interest periodical she works for, suggests that incorporating women's issues into the main columns would be far more productive. But, in a paper less open to suggestions, or less aware, this may not work, in which case a separate column or page would help ensure that such issues do get covered.[2]

Another journalist, who works for a daily, feels that separate pages do tend to "ghettoise" but are better than having no coverage at all. She feels it would be worth-while to "push" for such pages in papers and magazines which are otherwise very "male-centered". Columns, she suggests, might be "safer" than pages, because the choice of an appropriate columnist would help ensure that a proper perspective is maintained.[3]

Although women journalists in general have misgivings over the utility and desirability of women's magazines and pages, the survey by the Bombay Women and Media group did evoke some unusual viewpoints:

One senior journalist "whose chief interest is politics" felt that these pages can be useful because "they discuss personal problems which would not otherwise be aired or shared". Another felt that they "help women articulate unexpressed thoughts and feelings". According to one response: "Some readers come across a new viewpoint for the first time through such columns... For many readers they open up a new way of thinking." (Women and Media, 1986)

Considering that it is the beauty-cookery formula which makes feminist hackles rise, here is an interesting comment from a senior journalist who writes on both feminist and general issues: "Separate women's pages need not be counter-productive if they are generally readable and attractive. I don't think columns on, say, beauty, are anti-feminist. A woman needs to look good and feel good for her own self-image, and most such columns these days are about care rather than cosmetics.

The same applies to cookery. If you don't look at cooking as an instrument of oppression you won't get uptight about it."[4]

Such opinions, which hardly toe the radical feminist line, have their own validity, coming as they do from women who are trying to initiate changes in media content and outlook while working under constraints and limitations over which they have little control.

Don't Forget The Readers

A woman journalist who works on the Sunday section of a national daily draws attention to the fact that articles on women's issues need to be read by men too. Her paper often carries woman-oriented articles but these are never too radical to put anyone off, and are selected keeping the readership profile in mind.[5] I may add from my own observation that the occasional (and clearly unintended) feminist message or comment on such pages from columnists and writers who do not carry a "feminist tag" do appear to evoke sympathetic responses from readers. Interestingly, media sociology too suggests that "non-purposive" communication is more likely to influence and may even be able to "convert" opinion more successfully than communication which is perceived as the "purposive" or deliberate variety.

Moving with, but not ahead

In an analysis of three Australian women's magazines, Beatrice Faust looks at the needs they serve and points to the fact that the magazines change as lifestyles change — always moving *with* the times but not ahead. An extract:

"Women's magazines, particularly the semi-paternal *Australian Women's Weekly*, have caught a lot of flak from the women's movement. They are portrayed as brainwashing tools which help to put women down and keep them there. Advertising sociologists such as Hugh Mackay insist that magazines reinforce existing attitudes rather than shape new ones and that, in fact, the publications are always slightly behind current standards. That is, the women shape the magazine and not vice versa. Certainly the magazines are extremely sensitive to women's needs and most vulnerable to reader response. It is only a couple of years since an advertisement for floral briefs by Kayer had to be withdrawn from *The Weekly* because readers found it offensive. There is a prima facie case for saying that magazines cannot be forcing women to swallow anything that the women themselves do not want.

"In general, the women's movement tends to regard all people as blank slates on which society writes its messages regardless of the individual's own wants and needs. This is to underestimate individual differences and to over simplify the complexity of individual development. *Woman's Day* was one of the most important influences on my own development,

An Editor's Story

It should be remembered that many women journalists, as indeed women in most professions, are not necessarily feminist in outlook from the very outset. Observation, personal experiences, and gradual exposure to feminist ideas may shape and sharpen their perceptions. In the case of a woman journalist this process may have its impact on her writings and other aspects of her media work to the extent that she is able to influence policy-making.

A former editor of a mass circulation regional language women's magazine has described the process of change within herself, its effect on the editorial content of her magazine, and her own subsequent involvement in activist work when she felt restricted by the limitations of the printed word.[6] In summary:

This journalist's efforts at changing the content of her magazine were unhampered as long as the senior managerial-cum-editorial hierarchy of the publishing group went along with her line of thinking. After a shake-up in this administrative set-up, there was pressure on her to shift the emphasis from social

along with miscellaneous school prizes dating back as far as World War-I, and ABC news broadcasts. Coming from a culturally deprived family, *Woman's Day* meant freedom to me.

"What sort of freedom could possibly be gleaned from such a rag? The personality quizzes, Dorothy Dix column and frequent features on psychology taught me that all human behaviour can be explained if we understand its causes, and that understanding can lead to change. To that extent the world became more manageable. The features on knitting, sewing and handicrafts taught me that it is possible to make an impact on material things — it was quite possible to generalise from household hints to dealing with bigger issues such as changing tyres. Obviously I was selecting the aspects of the pabulum which appealed to my own personal needs. The needs were there before the magazine was. When I discovered religion, Freud and Marx as a student at an old-fashioned feminist girls school, I stopped needing *Woman's Day*, but I often remember it with gratidude.

"My case illustrates one of the many unresolved binds which continue in women's movement thinking. Either there is something exceptional about exceptional people that should be recognised and explored, or else the media are much less powerful and influential than they are credited with being. On the basis of my own experience, I am inclined to support the Mackay thesis, that the magazines reflect and reinforce what is already there, rather than inflict new and noxious values on unsuspecting females. Looking at the magazines in relation to social change tends to confirm this view. *Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Day* and *New Idea* have had contrasted histories, each pointing to the same conclusion: the mags follow the market, they do not lead it."

— extracted from *Faust*, 1976

commitment to increasing sales and advertising revenue. Eventually she had no alternative but to resign from the magazine which she had worked with for 22 years, joining in a junior capacity and having risen to become its editor.

Among other things, during her editorship she tried to change the presentation and treatment of the traditional features. For example, in cookery, she started offering easy-to-make recipes, stressing nutritive values, trying to get husbands and children interested in the page, focusing on topics like medical diets, and keeping the emphasis on convenience rather than consumerism. The magazine initiated discussions on family roles, which drew a high level of reader participation. Topics like the restrictions imposed on widows and the rights of domestic maids generated controversy and even brought in negative responses from some disturbed readers. This editor says she also tried to change the policy regarding matrimonial ads but here she met with resistance and failed.

By the mid-80s, she had begun to encounter rising managerial opposition to the magazine's profile. The situation reached a head after the publication of a special issue on the Women's Decade which, she admits, was a bit heavy and ideological and "difficult" for the readers.

During the period from the late 70s to 1986 when she resigned, this editor feels that she did initiate a climate conducive to questioning of accepted values by readers, bringing about a feeling of "unrest" among them — which evoked both praise and criticism. On the basis of the letters she has received from readers she is convinced that a process of "conversion" had indeed been set in motion.

Advertisers call the tune

Referring to the emergence of the "new" type of women's magazine, Margaret Gallagher cites the example of *Viva* in Kenya which started in 1974 as a traditional magazine but tried to move in a feminist direction through changes in editorial policy. An extract:

"Still commercially supported, *Viva* has tried to combine an appeal to middle-class Kenyan women's conventional tastes with a policy of publishing regular, comprehensive articles on issues such as prostitution, birth control, female circumcision, polygamy and sex education. But dependence on advertising revenue imposes enormous limitations on what a magazine like *Viva* can publish. Opposition to its policy of including controversial material gradually built up. Eventually, after publication of an investigative article on the conditions of seisal workers early in 1980, the editor was told by the owners of the magazine to drop such issues in future: the journal's existence was in balance because of the threatened withdrawal of advertisements... Subsequent editions of *Viva* show a noticeable response to the warning with a much 'lighter' approach to any equality issues which do remain, but overall more reliance on the old themes of beauty, family and sexual relationships."

— Gallagher, 1981

Her experience is of special significance considering that the regional media as a whole, all over the country, is reportedly a pillar of conservative and traditional values. And her efforts to take her readers along with her on her own path of self-discovery surely has a relevance for the issue of women and the media.

Hamstrung by the Hierarchy

Again and again the theme which recurs is the way efforts to disseminate feminist ideas get stifled because of opposition from conservative managements and editorial decision-makers. Interestingly, even when women's pages are handled by journalists who are not themselves very feminist in outlook or perspective, the attitude of senior male decision-makers can prove to be an effective damper. (It should be noted that because of the climate of opinion created by the Women's Decade, even the not-so-feminist woman journalist can be expected to focus on at least some issues important to the movement.)

One woman sub-editor, who has handled the women's page (now discontinued) of a local edition of a national daily, is not exactly a crusading feminist, but even her not-very-radical efforts to give the page some substance have got thwarted because of the low priority given to the women's page by the editorial hierarchy.[7] For example, to cover an important local seminar a reporter has to be sent on a whole-day assignment to bring back any worthwhile report of the discussions — but the news editor was not interested in allowing any staffer to spend so much time on it. Therefore any in-depth writing on such local events would have to be done by a staffer attending it on her own time, and payment for women's page items is so niggardly that neither staffers nor freelancers are attracted to spend so much time on contributing.

Women's pages such as this one are, therefore, bound to be filled with trivia and superficial pieces. However, when we criticise them, as they roundly deserve to be criticised, we may not fully appreciate the precise role of the internal power structure in rendering the page so useless.

Experience of an Activist Group

This chapter began by focusing on some of the "uses" of the soft-sell approach and the fact that activists too are acknowledging the potential of women's magazines and pages in spreading awareness. A brief account of the observations of one activist group, Stree Shakti Sanghatana of Hyderabad, will be useful here:[8]

In 1981, soon after the local edition of an English daily started a women's page, this group began regularly contributing articles on a range of women's issues. They stopped doing so after a few months because they felt that the male journalist who took the major decisions regarding this page was giving more prominence to reactionary and tradition-reinforcing views, mostly from hostile male readers. Stree Shakti recalls how one of their members, a Sanskrit scholar, wrote an informed critique of Manu for the women's page, which brought a typically reactionary response from a male reader. Subsequently, the author's own rejoinder to this response was not published, ostensibly because her language was "too strong".

After experiences like this, the group decided that it was not worthwhile trying to use the page for the propagation of feminist ideas.

(Incidentally, I may add here than when I went through back issues of this paper, I could see how glaringly out-of-place Stree Shakti's ideological writings were in the midst of the formula fare which this page has consistently been offering over the years.)

Recently, in mid-1987, when the editor of a new Telugu daily, known to be a progressive, invited Stree Shakti to contribute to a women's page, some members of the group have again begun to write on a variety of issues over which they want to create public consciousness. At the time of writing there is not enough feedback on reader reaction or managerial opinion to state how well the experiment is progressing. But interestingly, the Stree Shakti member who spoke to me, looking back on their experience of the early 80s with the English daily, acknowledges that they need to select topics carefully and use language which is not too polemical and will strike a chord in readers. Now they write under individual names and don't lay stress on the feminist group-identity as they had done in the earlier experiment.

To use the non-feminist media for the feminist cause, and to do so without compromising on basic ideals, is undoubtedly a difficult task, particularly for radical activists. What is significant here is this radical group's evaluation of its own earlier experience and its decision to experiment again and try to use a women's page more effectively, this time being more conscious of the need to communicate with the readers. It is important also to note that such "using" of the media by activists is only possible when there is some basic ideological rapport with the decision-maker in the media.

Dilemma of the Media Professional

While the uses of soft-sell and the potential of women's magazines and pages are fairly clear, there is also the question of the misgivings women media professionals may have about writing for these columns, even though they may be very much a part of the movement. As was seen in the chapter, 'Inside Stories', women journalists find it professionally counter-productive to be labelled as feminist or as specialising in women's issues. As a journalist myself I know I would rather my by-line appeared on an edit page than on a women's page and in a current affairs journal rather than a women's magazine, even if, indeed *especially* if, my article is on a feminist issue. The importance of a topic definitely gets elevated when it is categorised as being of "general interest".

It should also be remembered that while women's magazine journalism may be an easier entry point into the profession for aspiring women writers, it could also prove to be a professional ghetto or a dead-end for a writer with varied interests and particularly for one with professional ambitions. Within the profession, more prestige goes with expertise on political and general issues than women's issues.

Thus, the misgivings of media women over being associated too closely with women's magazines and pages are quite understandable. However, the point I'd like to make is this: when these women try to get feminist issues incorporated

into the general features and columns, not only is this important to the movement but it should also be seen as another facet of the soft-sell approach — propagating the feminist viewpoint in a garb which is not seen as "propagandist" by readers who might not otherwise be receptive. And it shouldn't be forgotten that these writers have to do a fair amount of soft-sell to the internal media hierarchy in order to get such issues recognised as deserving coverage in the first place.

References and Notes

1 - 6
Personal communications in response to my questionnaire.

7. In an interview, this journalist mentioned that an earlier senior male decision-maker, who took a keen interest in the women's page, used to be more liberal in allowing staffers to take time off and attend important events or interview interesting women. (My own observation is that the page was not particularly feminist in outlook during his tenure, but apparently the two women handling the page felt more encouraged to make it as lively as they could.)
8. Interview with Vasantha Kannabiran of Stree Shakti Sanghatana.

The Unseeing Eye
Doordarshan Takes up The Women's Cause

** An interview with Germaine Greer on television's Sunday night Focus programme.

** Women activists and academics have an informal panel discussion with the Prime Minister on a range of women's issues.

** A 'Sach Ki Parchaiyan' programme on dowry harassment and other women's issues, interviewing victims, the police, activists, lawyers and women's groups.

No, Doordarshan hasn't gone feminist; but in its own way appears to be taking up the women's cause.

Government's stated policy on the women's question being what it is, it is fairly routine today to see TV programmes celebrating International Women's Day, reviewing the Women's Decade and periodically focusing on topical women's issues like dowry and female foeticide.

"Women-oriented" serials like *Kashmakash*, *Chehre*, *Swayamsiddha* and *Ratha Chakra* have made their appearances on prime time TV. At the time of writing a new Sunday morning serial, *Aur Bhi Hain Rahen*, featuring actress Tanuja, tries to generate vocational awareness and has the message (though not quite so radically stated) that marriage and family are not the be-all and end-all of a woman's life. And in the recent past, serials like *Mr Ya Mrs*, *Hum Log*, *Khandaan* and *Rajani* have tried to present some woman characters who are a departure from the old stereotypes.

Women-orientated serial on Doordarshan

So, what's the complaint against Doordarshan which, on the face of it, seems to be bending backwards to promote the women's cause? Broadly, Doordarshan's policy can be said to suffer the same lack of perspective one sees in the general media: a) allowing sexist and retrograde images to coexist with the new feminist ideas now being offered; and b) subverting the feminist theme. Additionally, Doordarshan can be accused of *not* taking hard policy decisions in line with the government's periodic progressive pronouncements on positive portrayal of women on TV.

Double Images

This phenomenon is similar to that described earlier as characterising the print media. The images of women in TV commercials, the weekly Hindi and

Positive and real

"Of all the 'modern women' portrayals seen on television so far, that of Badki in *Hum Log* appears to have been the most favourable and realistic. The character has been shown dealing with common, middle-class family problems and emerging as an active feminist. Even in the inevitable upheavals of her marriage, Badki has been shown as capable of independently handling the situation and remaining faithful to her beliefs and ideals."

— FAOW-c, 1985

regional films and TV plays, and in a lot of other programmes, are as sexist as ever, frequently bordering on the vulgar and the crude, particularly in the film-based song-and-dance sequences. Doordarshan's lack of perspective has resulted in sexist images in some serials and feminist images in others. On Sunday morning, Tanuja's forward-looking programme which rejects conventional values about women's role and place gives you culture shock over the air after Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, which has been widely criticised by feminists for its depiction of Sita and its reinforcement of patriarchal ideals.

The same contradiction can be seen in the advertisements. Women in all the commercials are depicted in stereotyped, mother-wife-sex object roles. While the government-sponsored prime-time TV spots at 9 p.m. focus on themes like education being more important for girls than early marriage.

It's a bewildering "mix" in which government's well-meaning efforts are successfully overshadowed by the dominant sexist component.

Subverting the Feminist Theme

In the guise of "woman-oriented" serials some extremely retrograde short stories have been telecast in *Kashmakash* and *Chehre* where, although the theme revolves around a central female character, only traditional and conventional values on women have been glorified.

Again, strong female characters in serials like *Khandaan* and *Rajani* have been portrayed as being unpleasantly aggressive and self-centered, so that their impact has been negative.

Buniyaad's loaded message!

"What does TV's most popular serial *Buniyaad* tell us? Dear men, this is your society, go ahead, enjoy yourselves, society is with you. The women hurt, insulted and cheated by you may become *jogins*, cabaret dancers or live an unhappy life. Don't bother. You will be married into families of equal status. Your respective wives will worship you as gods. No matter if they come to know about the other women. They will always be at your feet and you can lead a happy married life.

"Even if you have ruined the lives of your illegitimate children, the entire society, including the cheated women, will force them to come and beg for your mercy. Forgive them and everybody will applaud your generosity. Of course, to pay for all this, you may have to fall sick sometimes!

"Yes, you are the 'foundation' of society. A society with a glorious past, great culture and rich heritage."

— Letter by reader V.Vijaya
in the Hyderabad edition
of the *Indian Express*,
May 20, 1987

In an earlier serial, *Dadi Ma Jaagi*, the overall effect was to strengthen patriarchal values even though the serial attempted to condemn various social evils including dowry.

Mr Ya Mrs was supposed to be propagating the idea of role-reversal but succeeded only in projecting a reversal of *stereotypes*. Instead of showing that men and women *both* go out to work and *both* perform household tasks, the serial tried to present a "new" image of woman by making her go out to work, leaving the husband to cook and clean at home. The slapstick situations occurred when the couple reversed roles in the presence of relatives and neighbours to whom they felt compelled to put up a conventional front and pretend that it was she who cooked and he who "worked". By making the husband seem ridiculous, the serial sent out the message that housework is indeed a low-status and "unmanly" job, and not likely to elevate the esteem of anyone who does it.

Choosing the wrong themes

Commenting on how each new woman-oriented serial is taking Indian women backwards in character and attitudes, TV critic Amita Malik writes:

"It is bad enough that our serial makers should dig into the literature of a period which shows all-acquiescing women being pushed around by dominant males and totally at their mercy. It is much worse that Doordarshan and its selection committee, if any, should go along with them. Some say that producers deliberately choose such topics. The earlier, excellent serials like *Ek Kahani* did not, for one, concentrate on the woes of women as the newer serials do, although they explored the man-woman relationship. And secondly, even when regional in background, they had some very modern attitudes expressed by women. Rajani, with all her faults, was a modern, militant woman. And now look at the slide-down to *Swayamsiddha*. Serial makers choose famous writers like Bonophul, and then pick stories which are repulsive to modern thinking and which were certainly not conceived of in terms of TV serials which are supposed to be forward looking."

— *Express Magazine*, July 5, 1987)

Another View: Responding to the above comments, reader R.Rajesh of Cochin writes: "The author has unfairly put *Swayamsiddha* together with the current crop of ostensibly woman-oriented serials like *Chehre*. Conceptually *Swayamsiddha* was head-and-shoulders above any serial about women attempted on TV. For the first time, divorce was shown as a positive way out of a sterile, lifeless marriage for a woman... *Swayamsiddha* had its flaws. It was poorly directed, it moved at a snail's pace... the woman's group shown appears a little too rabid. Whatever

The serial *Swayamsiddha* did try to show that a broken marriage does not signal the end of all hope and that a divorced woman can live a fulfilling and meaningful life. But the treatment of the theme was so flawed that the total effect was negative. Besides, the depiction of the women's organisation, to whom the heroine turns, did nothing to enhance the image of activist groups. The serial portrayed them as a bunch of shrill and unreasonable women, all out for wreaking vengeance on "erring" males.

Absence of Policy

Contradiction and subversion on government-controlled television is to be more severely condemned than the same phenomenon in the general media. The controllers of the latter have not made any pro-woman policy statement whereas the government is constantly affirming its commitment to positive media portrayal of women. And while Doordarshan's efforts to promote the cause of women is to be appreciated, unless it draws up an enlightened and strict set of criteria regarding what sort of images of women are going to be allowed on TV, the women's cause is not going to be served. If the double-images persist, if Doordarshan refuses to draw up a non-sexist code for advertising and other programmes, and if it allows reactionary themes to slip in unnoticed into the "woman-oriented" serials, then the TV programmes which do focus in a progressive manner on the women's dimension get diluted and even nullified.

So far, all that has emerged from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry have been policy *statements* all of which are to be welcomed. But as long as there are no hard policy *decisions*, rigorously applied to every item telecast, be

faults one may find with *Swayamsiddha*, it was not anti-woman. It is emphatically not to be compared with the celebrations of masochism that abound on TV today under the guise of feminism."

— *Indian Express*, July 19, 1987

In the Eye of the Beholder: Personally, I feel that while the retrograde values of some serials have been blatant, in some others it seems to be a question of how one looks at it. *Ratha Chakra* was criticised for overdoing the theme of woman's misery and helplessness. I agree it was a depressing serial, but one did catch sight of the central female figure's rebellion against, and resentment of, the established values, even if she was shown as being unable to do anything about it. Critics have deplored *Kala Jal's* depiction of polygamy in a Muslim milieu and the ill-treatment of women by women. Personally I felt that the story, while depicting an authentic social situation, also brought out the fact that women are victims of a system which makes them turn against each other. It did *not* glorify the system but showed it up for what it is. Yet, other writers have felt that it was not an appropriate theme for TV.

they commercials or feature programmes, one can only conclude that the government is eager to present a progressive and pro-woman image for itself but careful to do nothing which will hurt those sections from whom it gets its revenue.

Women's Groups and Government Media

Because of government's paper policy on the women's question it has been possible on occasions for activist groups to collaborate with TV to produce programmes on important topics.

In 1985-86, the Dowry Death Investigation Committee of Hyderabad worked with the local Doordarshan unit to produce a series of programmes in which parents of dowry victims narrated the incidents. There were interviews with the police, lawyers, judges, doctors in the burns ward, activist women, students, etc. Feedback from the audience reportedly showed that the series made a powerful impact on the viewing public which till then had not been much moved by the periodic press reports on dowry deaths. Coming face-to-face with the grief-stricken mothers of dowry victims was an awesome experience for many viewers.

The committee, which is a group of activist women from different organisations, was able to help in the making of this programme because of the initiative of a male TV producer known for his progressive views and willingness to venture into "controversial" areas. (Some of the cases highlighted in the programme were then under police investigation and the series was effective in showing up the apathy of the authorities.)

In other cities too, and on the national programme, Doordarshan has taken the help of activist women in organising panel discussions and feature programmes on women's issues. Not surprisingly, such programmes have steered clear of anything *politically* controversial or embarrassing to the government. For example, activist lawyer Indira Jaisingh's comments on the Muslim Women's Bill were deleted in the telecast version and she has filed a public interest petition against Doordarshan in the Supreme Court.

Playing Safe

In this context of government always playing safe and protecting ruling party interests while apparently exposing the women's cause, the comments of *Manushi* editor Madhu Kishwar are relevant.[1] (Madhu's views on various issues have often been sought by TV programme producers and she has also taken part in TV discussions.)

She says: "My impression is that the government wants to present an image of a very sympathetic policy on women's issues. Most of it is meaningless rhetoric. Some of it is due to the fact that there are a few bureaucrats in the government who are fairly sympathetic to the women's cause. So they do their bit to give coverage to women's issues."

Though the *Manushi* group has not actively tried to *use* the government media, TV producers do seek their participation in various programmes. "We

were invited to present one of our songs for the March 8 programme but the song was so badly mutilated that we sent a strong letter of protest to Doordarshan." (This protest also got some press coverage.)

Based on their experiences so far, Madhu comments: "My own feeling is that women's issues in the commonly understood sense of the term are considered fairly 'safe' by the government. While we may be allowed to talk of dowry, wife abuse and so on, it would be impossible to say anything on some of the other issues that *Manushi* has been involved in — like communal riots and massacres, human rights violations by the government machinery, problems of landless poor women, government policies regarding tribals, government responsibility in droughts and water scarcity, etc.

"For instance, I was interviewed at length for the Republic Day programme. They had insisted I speak only on 'women's issues'. I declined. They agreed to include other comments and they tape-recorded a half-hour long interview. But finally they chopped and cut the interview in such a way that the main thrust of my comments was completely lost. This is not the only time such a thing has happened. There have been occasions when producers have refused to identify me as a *Manushi* person because they feared that it might appear as though TV was promoting *Manushi* — which I insisted was absurd because they would not have had such reservations about introducing the editors of, say, *Times of India* or *Mainstream*.

"All this and more has made us extremely wary of appearing on radio and TV. There is always a *Lakshman Rekha* beyond which you cannot step without being censored or blacklisted. That is why you will find *Manushi* people being invited for relatively 'safer' programmes and even then they edit and chop our comments very often."

Scope Within Limits

As Madhu points out, certain aspects of the women's question are "safe" and the government media is willing to focus on these. However, there is a clear potential for activist groups to use this willingness and highlight at least those issues which are "permissible". As a Saheli member remarks: "We know in advance what they will allow and what they won't."[2] Within the prevailing limitations it would still be worthwhile to use government media actively because of its reach and the specially powerful impact of television.

The observations of Chingari of Ahmedabad suggest that more women's groups should consider collaboration with TV and radio, though their success would necessarily depend on their being able to identify programme producers sympathetic to the feminist cause, and having the proper perspective:

"Chingari has, in its limited encounters with government media, had positive experiences. Our personal good relations with some women on the media, both AIR and local TV, has helped. TV's Space Application Centre filmed Chingari's street play as part of a programme on a local dowry death case. Unfortunately it was not telecast because the husband of the victim filed a case against the TV station. Chingari is now collaborating with the same producer who is doing a programme on women's organisations.

"AIR recorded two feminist songs by Chingari for the March 8 programme in 1987. Chingari had been invited to sing for a Women's Day programme organised by the Social Welfare Board. Many traditional women's organisations were participating in this programme. After some arguments with the organisers, we managed to start the celebrations with feminist songs and this was the first time such a broadcast began without the usual bhajans.

"Chingari has now been asked to do a 20-minute programme with feminist songs and commentary for the regular women's programme. This will be quite a breakthrough in the traditional set-up of Gujarat.

"We have had several discussions on whether we should use government media. We have finally decided that this is the only way to propagate feminist ideas. We are very conscious that we should not get co-opted. We are also aware of the government's own motive of presenting a radical image of itself."[3]

(Chingari's positive attitude regarding using of government media should be seen also in the context of this group's experiences with the local print media, some of which have been negative and discouraging. See chapter 'Blow Hot Blow Cold'.)

Need to Collaborate

At the 1985 Bombay workshop, the Women and Media group presented a discussion paper on what should be the movement's role vis-a-vis television. (FAOW-c, 1985). Besides discussing the new images of women on TV, and the dangers which go with the new stereotypes, the group suggested that the movement should make active use of television and collaborate with TV producers towards making relevant programmes. They listed three objectives:

Provoke thought and concern without alienating most viewers.

Inform without being boring.

Inspire to higher goals and newer roles without degenerating into superhuman stereotypes which cannot serve as role models.

To the above I would like to add one more task: analyse some of the popular but retrograde serials and themes by investigating what exactly audiences derive from these and understanding their responses with greater insight. (The need for this is clear from some of the facts regarding audience reaction which were mentioned in the section 'The Audience Strikes Back')

For example, at the time of writing, feminists have been protesting against the values and images portrayed in the *Ramayan* serial. There is evidence that the serial is widely watched by all sections and age-groups of viewers. Critics of the Sita image are being countered with the assertion that the serial is merely being "faithful" to the original epic. Two questions can be asked here: Should such serials be telecast at all by a government medium when they try to sanctify patriarchal values under the guise of religious principles? And, can the *Ramayana* be interpreted and depicted differently, in line with modern values, retaining its story value without glorifying the retrograde elements?

Tailpiece

If feminists are concerned over the dubious manner in which some TV serials, ostensibly taking up the women's question, are subverting the whole issue, some men appear to feel positively alienated, even threatened by the barrage of women-oriented serials. One male TV columnist went to the extent of describing the recent spate of women-oriented serials (at one time four of them were running concurrently!) as "anti-male".[4]

He says that since the Women's Decade, "the male has been the target of slanging and broadsides". Admitting that social problems should be highlighted, he feels that this should not be overdone. (Like the print media, there has been a tendency on TV too to depict the women's cause as being anti-male rather than anti-patriarchy, the two being quite different.)

On the other hand, it is a male TV columnist who has made the following insightful comment on *Swayamsiddha* which, he says, presents a distorted reality of women's working lives:[5]

"Vijay Tendulkar has a warped understanding of workplace power-relationships involving women employees. And he reduces their exploitation to an extreme form, that of sexual exploitation. He does so not merely because it might suit the dramatic requirements of his serial but because he refuses to understand the nature of workplace politics and therefore the complex nature of power-relationships it entails."

References and Notes

1. Personal communication.

2 & 3
Observations made in Saheli's and Chingari's responses to questionnaire.

4. 'Anti-Male Serials' by Neel Batra in 'Radio and TV Review', *Hindustan Times*, May 11, 1987.

5. 'Working Women, Suspicious Men' by Bharat Bhushan in 'Network' column, *Times of India Sunday Review*, March 8, 1987.

Liberation Sells
The Theme that Launched the Gadget and Other Ads

"Where would you *Lib* if you were in Bombay? Women Libbers in Bombay recently had a visitor they identified with very closely - Germaine Greer, author of the novel (sic) *The Female Eunuch*. She's also the 'person' who ushered in the women's lib movement in America (sic). Ms.Germaine Greer gave a number of interviews to the Press from

her luxury suite in the Hotel Oberoi Towers. Her advice to the women of India was brief and confident: 'Fight for your rights'. Thank you Germaine. It was a pleasure having you with us."

— Ad for Oberoi Hotels in *India Today*, (November, 1-15, 1979)

If women's magazines have decided that it pays to sell liberation (at least one version of it), advertisers on their part have found that liberation as a theme can be used to sell their products and their own image.

Three variations of the liberation theme can be found in today's ads: One, liberation as the selling point of domestic gadgets; two, ads which project an advertiser's concept of a "liberated" woman who uses this, that or the other product; and three, the big corporate sector, as well as the government, using the women's question to sell itself.

The Gadget Ads

"Now let the Real Women's Lib Start At your Home."
"Liberation is Now Yours to command."

These are the headings for advertisements selling domestic gadgets. The first is an ad for Janee Wet-Grinder, addressed to husbands who are urged to "liberate" their wives from housework by giving them a gadget which the copy describes as "a maid for your madam". The second is an ad for Uniwash Home Laundromat which promises to transform the reader from a "harassed wife" to a "happy spectator" of all her home washing. The baseline slogan is: "Dream Machine of Women's Lib".

Many of the household appliance ads sell the idea that gadgets mean liberation (from housework) even if they don't all descend to using the phrase "women's lib" in the copy. These ads, which attempt to ride on a feminist wave, claim that household appliances will "take the work out of housework" and guarantee what they call "true liberation" and claim that women can become "superwomen" by acquiring gadgets which will enable them to perform all their domestic roles plus handle their careers successfully. Of course, none of these ads says a word about the sex-based division of labour at home, which is what women want to liberate themselves from, and which no gadget can guarantee.

Adman's Image of Liberation

A spate of recent household product ads have tried to project a spurious version of modernity which is equated with the "new" woman, the one who is aware of her rights and successfully performs a variety of roles, traditional and non-traditional. This modernity in turn is equated with the "new" woman's choice of a particular brand. The Duncan Tea ad campaign of 1982 was the first such series as far as I can remember. Recently the TV commercial for Biz washing

powder used the same idea without putting it into words. An exaggerated version of the theme was seen in the press campaign for Merry Wash, dishwashing liquid. The copy claims that the product is for the "new woman" who is "liberated" and "has proved it without giving up her femininity".

"She's a man's equal," the ad says, "and she better be treated like one. She's entitled to a good life. And things better be made easy for her. In the wake of this new woman now comes a new product which makes dishwashing a lot easier for her."

There's more copy in this vein, while the headline screams: "Let no man say that a woman's concept of being liberated is burning bras, staying single and changing words like boycott into girlcott."

Whew!

The Corporate-Wallahs

Ever since the *Times* group introduced its annual contest for "social awareness" advertising, the big firms and top ad agencies have been vying with each other

to design ads condemning dowry and female foeticide. They go for other themes too, like drug addiction, health and environment. But the women's question has much dramatic potential and many of the prize-winning efforts have been on this theme. A widely-publicised entry in 1987 was the series against female foeticide one of which used a picture of the young Indira Gandhi, the copy suggesting that she wouldn't have been born at all if her parents had been "anti-daughters".

All very fine, but one cannot forget that when it comes to advertising their own products these same advertisers and ad agencies obstinately stick to the old stereotyped images of women or, jumping on the liberation bandwagon, produce new stereotypes which are, if anything, more insidious.

Government Ads

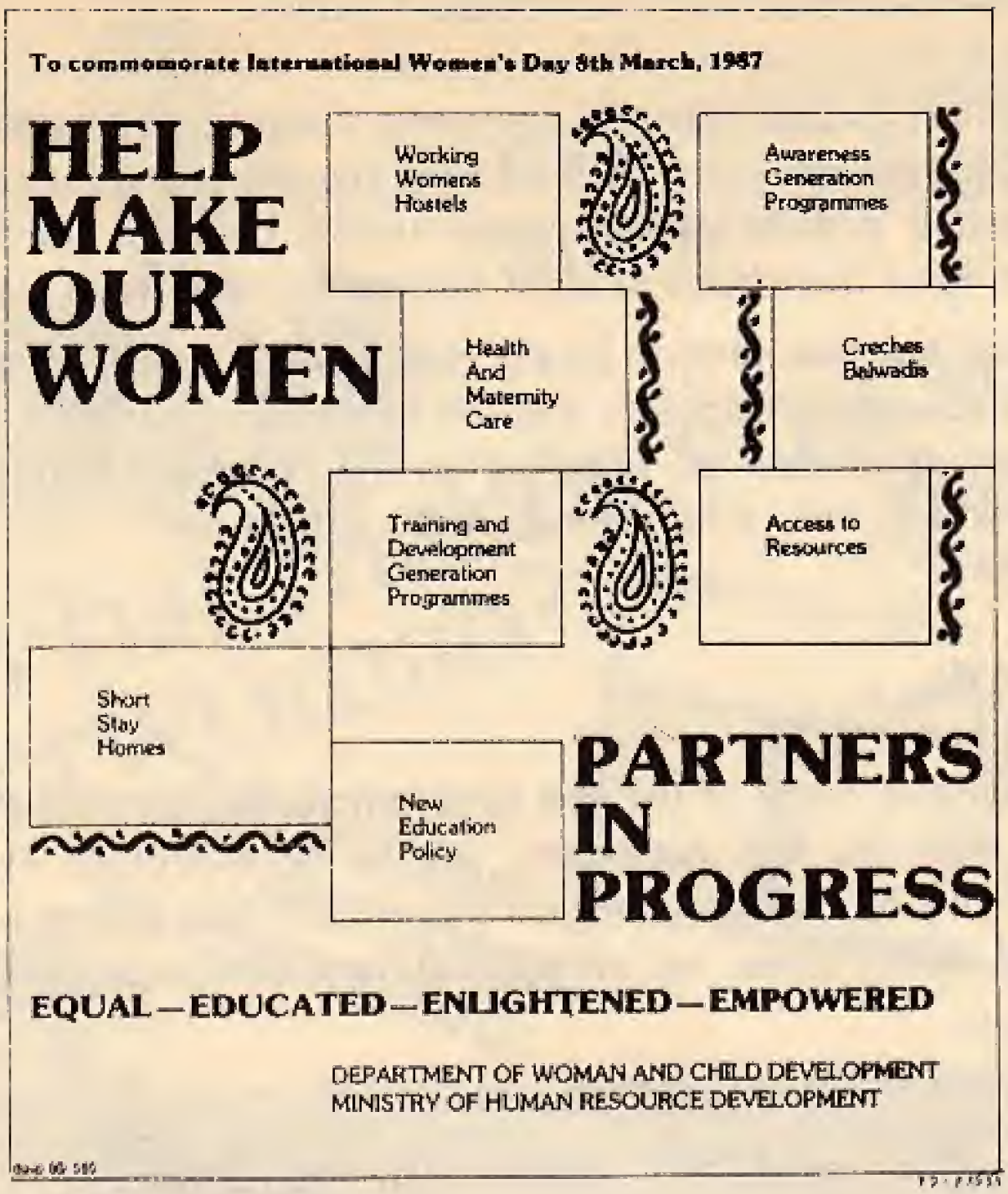
On the other hand, some of the new government ads, especially those produced in collaboration with the UN Agencies,[1] are to be welcomed even if one may be cynical about how sincere they are or how much real action is going to back the new concepts. They stand out refreshingly on newspaper pages where other

New and old games for advertisers

"Advertisers have gone to town on the 'liberated' theme — using it to sell everything from kitchen units, to jeans and perfume. In her book *Decoding Advertisements*, Judith Williamson explains how advertisements become 'hollowed-out systems of meaning'... all the more successfully when they are dealing with something which is hostile to advertising itself.

"The women's movement, says Williamson, 'has provided advertisements, one of the most sexist fields of communication there is, with a vast amount of material which actually enhances their sexist stance'. There is a television ad for an aftershave, Censored, where a woman is beating a man at chess. But then he puts on the aftershave and she is wildly attracted to him that she leaps up, knocking over the chess-board where she had him checkmated, and jumps on him like a wild animal. Now, far from the effect being to make us realise how inadequate the man as if he cannot stand being beaten at chess by a woman, her 'cool' intelligence and obviously liberated image are in fact made to devalue themselves. Because the point is that *even* a cool, 'dominating' woman, an intellectual threat to a man, even she will become little more than an animal, and a captivated one, on smelling Censored cologne for men. It is obviously more of an achievement to win over a 'liberated' woman than one who was submissive all along. Many ads are based on this line: 'She is liberated, but...' "

— extracted from
Coote and Campbell, 1982



product ads continue to sell the mother-wife-sex object image of women. I particularly liked the half-page newspaper ad released in September 1987, jointly by the Department of Women and Child Development, the Directorate of Adult Education and UNICEF.

The picture shows a father and a teenage daughter with her arms full of books. The heading: "I cannot protect my daughter all her life. But her education will." The copy goes on to mention that if she later faces marital problems or other crises, only her education will be able to see her through.

In 1985, the Ministry of Social and Women's Welfare along with UNICEF released an excellent series of ads designed to promote the value of daughters and their right to an equal status with sons. They had the heading "Equality is her birthright", and a variety of baselines: give them an equal share, give them an equal change, give them equal opportunities, etc. The visuals were imaginative and the whole effect was very inspiring.

Then there were the DAVP ads of 1987 aimed at encouraging women to join the civil services. And the inevitable Human Resources Ministry ad which one has come to expect unfailingly on International Women's Day. The 1987 DAVP ad for this occasion had the baseline: Equal-Educated-Enlightened-Empowered.

Though there's no doubt that government image gets enhanced by these ads, they do serve a purpose and like government's policy statements on TV images, they have their uses for the movement: for, they are statements of commitment and on the basis of a stated commitment, the movement can push for and demand follow-up actions.

What makes one uneasy is that once the establishment, including the government, realises that it can *use* the women's question for its own purpose, the situation can turn frighteningly bizzare.

In 1985, a three-quarter page newspaper ad urging the reader to vote for Congress (I) had a line drawing of a woman's face while the copy urged the women of India to use their power to shape a new society.

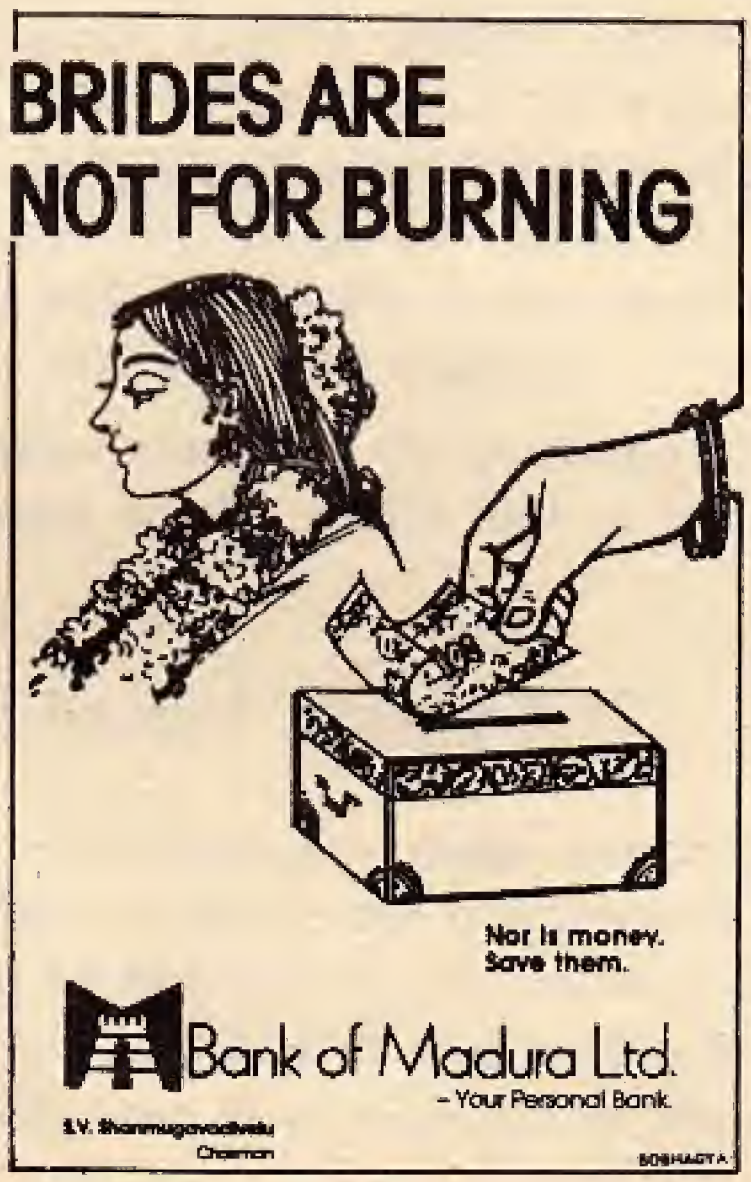
A *Bank of Madura* ad has the heading : "Brides are Not for Burning" and the copy adds: "Nor is Money, Save them." (i.e., save the brides and also save your money instead of spending it!)

At the 1986 Women's Studies Conference in Chandigarh, Thums Up banners all over the Punjab University campus announced the dates of the meeting while the files and notepads given to delegates all sported the Thums Up logo. Markfed brought out a special brochure, distributed during the meeting, and each delegate received a farewell gift pack of jams and preserves from the company. It left many of us feeling that we and our movement were getting hijacked by the establishment.

It's amazing how readily and unthinkingly sponsorship money gets accepted and how speedily the product promoters zoom in on women-events. If I found the Thums Up shadow hovering over the Chandigarh meet disturbing, back home in Hyderabad an invitation card for the presentation of the 1986 Durgabai Deshmukh Abinandana award left me speechless. The function was jointly sponsored by the Abinandana panel and, of all things, Syndet washing powder. (The award is for service to the cause of women and the recipient was a well-known women's rights activist.)

The back of the invitation card had a visual of the Syndet pack and copy in Telugu extolling its qualities.

Whew, again!



References and Notes

1. One may mention here the new government sponsored prime time TV spots on family planning, some of which for the first time suggest that men have a responsibility too. Of course they could be subjected to a feminist analysis which will reveal that they don't suggest that men should use condoms or get vasectomised but merely that they should have fewer children and space their families. They also use the analogy of the plant world to show that "immature" bodies cannot produce healthy fruit which is a far cry from the feminist stand on birth control. And yet, in the Indian context, these TV spots are a step forward because they acknowledge that FP is not a woman's concern only. The woman in one of the sequences is urged to eat well because she is pregnant, and the feminist response to this quite rightly would be that she should eat well whether or not she is pregnant. Again, in the Indian context this focus *is* a step forward because traditionally women eat last and least and under-nutrition during pregnancy is a big problem. Then there is the sequence where a pregnant daughter-in-law is praised for saying that whether the baby is a boy or a girl her only prayer is that it should be healthy. The *bahu* is traditional and demure, head covered and eyes downcast. But in the Indian context, where son-preference takes pernicious proportions, this sequence is a forward looking one, never mind the stereotyped images of the patriarchal joint family.

VII

WITH A VIEW TO CHANGE...
... From Inside and Outside

Admitting that the media distorts the women's question, what can be done towards initiating change and ensuring positive portrayal and more enlightened coverage of women's issues?

Change assuredly can come only through initiatives from progressive elements both inside and outside the media. Today, there are media persons, women and men within the media, who support, or are sympathetic to, the women's cause. What can they do to influence decision makers and colleagues to adopt a more committed perspective and policy in the treatment of women's issues? Can progressive elements within the media help create a new climate of opinion and get journalist unions to adopt a non-sexist code? And how can activists in the movement initiate changes in media content and use media to influence the attitude of the public and of media persons to the women's question?

This concluding chapter examines the possibilities for change and ventures some suggestions for people in the media and in the movement.

More Women or a Changed Perspective?

It is often suggested that inducting more women into the media, especially in decision-making positions, would be one way towards changing media portrayal of women. While it could be helpful, by no means does it follow automatically. Some media women can be as sexist in their outlook as media men, while on the other hand, some media men have displayed a sensitive understanding of the women's dimension.

In a special report on parliament proceedings during the Bofors debate (*India Today*, August 31, 1987) it was a woman reporter who described the women MPs as looking as if they'd "rather be knitting sweaters" somewhere else. It was a senior woman staffer on the *Hindustan Times* who commented disparagingly on the clothes worn by women lawyers ('Low Necks at High Court', May 4, 1987) and evoked sharp protests from them against the degrading image drawn up by the report.

And it was a male columnist in the *Times of India* who, during his short stint, wrote with commendable perception on the images of women in TV serials and advertisements. This is of course not to suggest that "women are their own enemies", which is the media's own favourite distortion, but to stress that it is less a matter of gender, and more a matter of ideological commitment, which determines a media person's attitude. That said, obviously the chances are that women are more likely to feel strongly about the denigration of their own sex and therefore more likely to be ideologically committed to change. But in the media, as in other aspects of the movement, it is important to transcend gender and to recognise the links which the movement has with *all* progressives, regardless of sex, and therefore there is strategic importance in drawing every progressive element into the struggle; particularly those from the opposite sex, whose support is essential if any dent is to be made in a profession which is so male-dominated.

Non-Sexist Code

Sexist terms and phrases are often used by sheer force of habit and the adoption and propagation of a non-sexist code would be an effective way of drawing the attention of media people to alternative terminologies. It has been suggested by some that too much stress should not be laid on the use of words like "chairperson" etc, because it diverts attention from other pernicious aspects of media portrayal. However, a conscious use of non-sexist terms does have its own effect on the way people look at all other aspects of the women's questions. To quote one male media analyst on the subject of sexist expressions and language:

"Orientation" needed

The following is from a report on the NAMEDIA meet in New Delhi, in December 1983 (*Hindu*, December 13, 1983):

"Gender inequality in policies: An interesting resolution put forward by a woman journalist emphasised that the communication policies of all third world countries, both capitalist and socialist, 'bypassed' the 'gender inequality' prevalent in these societies. Unless such policies provided equal access and participation to women, who constituted three-fourths of the illiterate in India, the new information order would be meaningless. She proposed special training courses for senior editors and policy-makers to 'reorient their thinking on the portrayal of women in the media'."

"Like many men I have been alerted to their significance by the work of the women's movement over the past few years. Indeed, I now find the unconscious sexism of my earlier book, *Teaching About Television*, written just eight years ago, so offensive as to be virtually unreadable." (Masterman, 1985) Supporting the idea of a non-sexist code, he gives the example of guidelines issued in 1984 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to producers and announcers for avoiding the use of unconsciously sexist vocabulary. He also cites the guidelines issued in Britain by the National Union of Journalists (see box). Publishing houses like McGraw-Hill have drawn up guidelines on the use of non-sexist phrases by authors and editors.

Since the "prescriptive" approach inherent in such codes is objected to by those who consider it a matter of "freedom of expression", the question is really how to present and word these guidelines and codes in such a manner as not to be off-putting.

The need for a code which has the backing of unions is evident considering the difficulties faced by lone media women struggling to get their newspapers to stop using sexist terms like eve, housewife, newsmen, etc. (Often a heading which says "housewife attacked" or "housewife dies in accident" could just as well have used the word "woman"). In their survey, the Bombay Women and Media group found that media women who do take up the issue of sexist language face hostility and indifference.

Mind your language

Some helpful suggestions for avoiding discrimination against women drawn up by Britain's National Union of Journalists are listed below:

Instead of		*Try*
Businessman	...	Business manager, executive, boss, business chief, head of firm, etc.
Cameraman	...	Photographer, camera operator
Newsman	...	Journalist, reporter
Firemanmen	...	Firefighter, fire crew
Foreman	...	Supervisor
Salesmengirl	...	Assistant, shop staff
Man or mankind	...	Humanity, human race, humans, people, average citizen
Manpower	...	Workers, work-force
Man-made	...	Synthetic, artificial
Housewife	...	Often means shopper, consumer, the cook
Mothers	...	Often means parents
Dolls, birds, ladies.		These, and puns arising from them are not funny
Spokesman	...	Official, representative

— extracted from Masterman, 1985

A reporter from Bangalore says: "Every time I wrote 'reporters' instead of the usual 'talking to newsmen', the word 'reporters' would be deleted and replaced with 'newsmen'. When I protested I was told that newsmen was a shorter word."[1]

A non-sexist code would be a useful way also of introducing new and young entrants into media professions to a more enlightened approach. And related to this is the need for curriculum additions in journalism courses which at the moment have no input at all on the question of sexism. Two women lecturers at the Osmania University's department of journalism tell me that there is nothing in the present course on this aspect. On their own they bring it up in their lectures. They also mention the general indifference of male colleagues to this issue.

Tips on using the media

Because of mass media's tendency to resist social change and maintain the status quo, a host of small journals and newsletters have emerged, brought out with difficulty by struggling progressive groups, low on funds and facilities, and taking up issues ranging from health, environment and women, to the nuclear question, the peace movement and questions concerning minorities and the oppressed everywhere. The birth and growth of the parallel media, and this includes the feminist media, is a comment on the inadequacies of the mass media in serving the cause of progressive movements everywhere.

However, progressive groups all over the world are also alive to the importance of using the mass media to raise and widen consciousness and for the specific purpose of influencing official policy and stimulating official action. *Using the Media* by Denis Macshane (Pluto Press, 1979) is a useful source of information to activists. The handbook is designed "to equip workers, trade union officials, community activists, local political activists and pressure groups" for the most effective use of the media. The author, a journalist, writes:

"Apart from the implications of formal ownership and although fringe radicalism may sometimes be tolerated, the career structure of journalism puts a premium on *conformity* to economic and social norms. There are established news values which emphasise the sensational, the confrontational, the personal, at the expense of proper analysis.

"While acknowledging the reasons why newspapers, magazines, television and radio are the way they are, this does not mean leaving them to get on with it. Our basic argument is that the media has a way of operating which should hold no fear or mystery for non-professionals.

"Workers and others have a duty to ensure that no barrier is put between their case and its public presentation in the media on account of lack of knowledge of how news is produced or undue wariness about the

Towards Increasing Coverage with a Perspective

During the various UN conferences in connection with the Decade, it was suggested that special 'features services' would be a good way of feeding media with material on women and with a women's perspective, and thereby increasing coverage. Some of these features services operating from different parts of the world are being subscribed to by various newspapers in different countries. In India, Inter Press Service started a wing, the Women's Features Service, from Delhi, in 1986. A few newspapers use their features and it would be helpful if committed media people persuaded more papers to subscribe to the service. WFS itself could think of more variety in their fare to fit into existing formats of dailies and periodicals.

behaviour of journalists. Newspapers and broadcasting stations are not neutral. They use people. But they can also be used."

Referring to the time, money and energy spent by governments and the corporate sector to see that their case is put across by the media, the author stresses the importance of PR initiatives by activists to establish friendly contacts with journalists, reminding them that *most media people are themselves from backgrounds with no understanding of activism or progressive social movements*. The book gives tips on how to initiate and react to press coverage; the importance of complaining when coverage is distorted, the purpose being to put constant pressure on journalists to be fair; how to put across the viewpoint of the movement during a dispute or a negotiation; seizing the initiative to ensure that journalists know the facts and opinions from the movement's viewpoint; which papers to use to reach whom; how to write press releases; how, when and why to hold a press conference; how to deal with journalists, what to say to them, etc. He adds:

"All newspapers and magazines carry a letters column and letters columns are widely read. Yet people organising a campaign or running a dispute often forget about this when planning media coverage. A good letter can be a spur to a news editor to initiate news coverage of the points mentioned. Letters to the editor are a useful way of keeping an issue in the public eye. Another way to increase the impact of a letter and give it more chance of being published is to get lot of signatures to it.

"Complaining about *bad* media coverage is a vital part of the process of getting *good* media coverage. It is important if a story is wrong, whether through inaccuracy, distortion or unfairness, that the media be made aware of it. What you must do is *not* simply shrug your shoulders and put it down to the evil machinations of the capitalist media. You must complain and react quickly."

Change from Inside: One Experience

Dinaz Kalwachwala, a television producer working with the development communications unit of the Indian Space Research Organisation, has narrated how she and her team produced two successful serials on satellite TV for a rural community in Kheda district of Gujarat.[2] The programmes were aimed at both men and women, towards raising awareness on issues related to women's status, oppression and employment. Feedback from viewers on both serials has been heartening and demonstrates how a committed team using a participatory approach can use a medium like television with effect. Their experience shatters the myth, popularly held, of the limitations of a government medium, because it is "controlled" and not "free". In this instance, the government's stated policy on women has been effectively exploited by an ideologically committed team and used for a progressive cause.

In their *Nari Tu Narayani* serial, the team got women viewers to identify their problems and their felt needs, and then researched each topic to give them the information relevant to each situation in an "entertainment" form like drama. The *Nyay-Anyay* serial had the same orientation and covered family law as well as laws related to work. On one occasion a dowry death incident was taken up by the team, working in co-ordination with local activists, and the impact of this through such a powerful medium was far greater than any effect of reportage through the print media. This particular serial on law even had an interview with Shehnaaz Sheikh, who has challenged the constitutional validity of Muslim Personal Law.

Based on her experiences with television, Dinaz raises some crucial discussion points: One, should programmes on women's issues be labelled as 'women's programmes' when they ought to be addressing both men and women as well as society as a whole? She points out that such compartmentalising results in positive portrayal being adhered to only in the women's serials while sexism and neglect of the women's dimension continue to reign in all the other general programmes. And two, only if programme producers are themselves sensitised and given an orientation, and only if independent bodies monitor television's portrayal of women, can appropriate presentation be ensured.

She points to the self-censorship exercised by media personnel who are themselves hesitant to take up radical or controversial themes. Her argument is that it is important for progressive elements to enter the system and work within it to initiate changes, and that without this, protests and slogan-shouting from outside may achieve little.

... And From Outside

As pointed out in the section 'Face to Face', activists in the movement acknowledge that they must consciously make strategic and effective use of the media. Considering how often the actions and issues taken up by activists groups get distorted by the media, certainly a more streamlined "PR" approach by the movement would be worth attempting. It would also be worth considering how to set up a flow of information from the feminist media into the mainstream

media in much the same way that specialist journals in science and medicine are utilised as sources for media stories. The section on audience responses has pointed already to the need for better modes of *communicating* feminist ideas more persuasively. Writer-activists getting acquainted with media's criteria for newsworthiness, objectivity, etc is a must to ensure that material from activist sources is usable and credible by media's norms.[3]

Change-Agents

Conscious efforts by a handful of change-agents inside and outside the media appears to be the only hope for media's distortion of the women's question. Left to itself the media will continue to pay lip service to women's issues: sensational reports on women as victims, nestling check by jowl with the soft-porn and the stereotypes: "Good" women who swear by motherhood, and the somewhat "bad" ones who will continue to be described in headings as "eves" who are either "up in arms" or "on the warpath". When they are not indulging in "sexual politics" that is, or wallowing in the "feminine mystique".

References and Notes

1. 'Women in the Media', report from Bangalore by Geeta Seshu, *Countermedia*, Vol.1, No.4, 1987.
2. 'Nari Tu Narayani: Exploring Alternative in Television' by Dinaz Kalwachwala in *Take One* published by Jagori of New Delhi. The contents of this journal include presentations made at the symposium during the 1986 Hyderabad Film Festival.
3. See section 'The Audience Strikes Back' on the effect of polemics and ideological jargon in feminist writings. Media sociology shows that messages are more likely to persuade if they appear to be "non-purposive". Thus, the list of guidelines to correspondents issued by WFS quite understandably mentions that the service is not meant to be a vehicle for publicising the manifestos of women's groups. Clearly feminist activists must differentiate between the kind of writing they do for the feminist and progressive media and the kind they offer to the general media if they are to use the latter successfully. And while it is necessary to persuade media to change its criteria for news-values, in the short-term it is also necessary for the movement to supply media with material which is acceptable according to existing norms.

AFTERWORD

This study was not meant, and does not claim, to be quantitatively exhaustive. It is admittedly impressionistic and ventures to be nothing more than a tentative commentary on issues and trends. I have looked only at those newspapers and magazines which have been readily available. Perhaps there may have been more illuminating examples in papers and periodicals which I have not studied. As mentioned in the chapter 'Virtual Image', the regional language press has not been included at all in this study. The experiences and observations of only a few women's groups and media women could be obtained. And the comments on audience responses are certainly not based on any exhaustive feedback. The responses recorded in this book are aimed primarily at stimulating more thought, research and action in the areas covered.

Each section in this book actually deserves a comprehensive and detailed study by itself. My object was merely to put together available information and articulate my own understanding on some facets of the women and media question which go beyond the much-written-about issue of sexism. Hopefully this may bring about some initiatives from those who are associated with the media and with the women's movement.

A Statement of Commitment: Forward Looking Strategies (FLS) Drawn up at the 1985 Nairobi Meet

The Issue:

— Eliminating negative and stereotyped images of women in the media.

Governments Agreed to:

— Eliminate discriminatory, stereotyped and degrading images of women in the media.
— Launch comprehensive and sustained public campaigns using media and traditional institutions of communications to challenge and abolish all discriminatory perceptions, attitudes and practices by the year 2000.
— Take steps to control pornography and portrayal of women as sex objects.
— Involve women in making decisions about all public information efforts.
— Introduce measures to ensure that women participate in council and review bodies that regulate mass media including advertising.
— Promote women's cultural projects that change traditional images of women and men.
— Mobilize mass media to ensure public consensus on the need for men to share child-rearing responsibilities.
— Support the United Nations in carrying out studies on sex stereotyping in the mass media and in advertising.

The Issue:

— Promoting women's information networks.

Governments Agreed to:

— Support groups that promote the role of women as active participants in development to set up effective information communication networks.
— Foster international co-operation related to women's sharing of experience.
— Rely on information networks to publicize the FLS document and the goals of the Decade for Women, as well as women's programmes and activities.
— Increase availability of training for women in the use of audio-visual forms of information dissemination and in use of computers.

— *IWTC Newsletter*, 37/38 1986/87

Bibliography

Most of the references have been indicated in the text and at the end of each chapter. Some sources which have been frequently quoted are listed below:

1. Barrett Michele: 'Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics' in *Feminism, Culture and Politics* edited by Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan, 1982.
2. Bhasin Kamla and Agarwal Bina: Editors of *Women and Media: Analysis, Alternatives and Action*, ISIS International (Rome) and PAWF (Colombo). Published by Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1984
3. Coote Anna and Campbell Beatrix: *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, 1982.
4. Faust Beatrice: 'What the Weekly Women are Reading Now' in *International Forum: An Anthology of Essays from USA, UK, Africa and Australia*, edited by Bruce Elder, 1979.
5. Forum Against Oppression of Women

   FAOW-a : 'Perspective for the Autonomous Women's Movement in India: A Report on the December 1985 conference in Bombay.'

   FAOW-b : Discussion paper by Women and Media group on relationship between media and activists.

   FAOW-c : Discussion paper by Women and Media group on 'New Challenges of TV'.
6. Friedan Betty: *The Second Stage*, 1981
7. Gallagher Margaret: *Unequal Opportunities: The Case of Women and the Media*, UNESCO, 1981.
8. Masterman Len: *Teaching the Media*, Comedia Publishing Group, 1985.
9. *Samya Shakti: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol.2, No.1, 1985: 'Media and Women's Issues: Towards a More Effective Role' — report on a panel discussion organised by Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.
10. *Spare Rib Reader*: Edited by Marsha Rowe, Penguin 1982.
11. Women and Media Group: 'Women in Journalism', paper presented at the Third National Conference for Women's Studies in Chandigarh, October, 1986.

Some of the publications being distributed at CED:

1. Aspects of the Drug Industry in India
   — Mukarram Bhagat, CED. Rs. 20/-
2. The Tenth Month: Bombay's Historic Textile Strike — Factsheet I
   — Factsheet Collective. CED. Rs. 25/-
3. Communalism: The Razor's Edge - Factsheet II
   — Factsheet Collective. CED. Rs. 25/-
4. The Scarcer Half — Counterfact No. 9
   CED Health Cell Feature Rs. 5/-
5. Injecting NET-EN into India — Counterfact No.10
   — CED Health Cell Feature. Rs. 7/-
6. Contraception As If Women Mattered
   — Vimal Balasubrahmanyan, CED. Rs. 25/-
7. Hamari Zindagi Aur Bhopal (Hindi). Rs. 12/-
8. The Long Haul
   — Rajni Bakshi. Rs. 40/-
9. The Bhopal Tragedy
   — Ward Morehouse & Arun Subramaniam. Rs. 40/-
10. Temples or Tombs
    — Darryl D' Monte, C.S.E. Rs.180/-
11. A New Policy for Rural Development in South and South-East Asia — Its Sinister Significance
    — A. R. Desai. Rs. 3.50
12. Trends of Urban Development in India and Proliferation of Slums and Squatting
    — A. R. Desai. Rs. 3.50
13. One More News by Chandralekha Rs. 70/-
14. Trial by Fire by Women and Media Committee Rs. 5/-
15. Women Self Help and Naturopathy: Alternative Health Care for Women; Report of a Workshop at Shakti Rs. 10/-
16. Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight
    — J. Patel and M.Sykes Rs. 40/-
17. In Search of our Bodies
    — Shakti Rs. 50/-
18. Health and Family Planning Services in India
    — Debabar Banerji Rs.300/-
19. Nothing to Loose But Our Lives
    — D. Dembo, C. Dias & Others Rs. 70/-
20. The Struggle for Housing: A People's Manifesto
    — P. K. Das & Colin Gonsalves Rs. 20/-

Mirror Image
The Media and the Women's Question

Some press comments:

"This book will equip readers with the insight that is essential today as the media assaults us from all sides with subtle and not-so-subtle messages... (It) exposes the print media's distortion and subversion of the women's question... (This book) should be read by all consumers of the popular media... Vimal's is a pioneering effort."

— Kalpana Sharma
in the *Indian Express*

"This book derives its uniqueness by going beyond a mere scrutiny of sexism in the media. (It) mirrors the dialectic between the media and the growing women's movement."

— Sundheendra Kulkarni
in *The Sunday Observer*

"Ultimately, the media's distortion of women's issues is not an isolated phenomenon. It is only part of a general myopia which includes within its fold all progressive trends. It is this universal perspective of the author that renders this specific study relevant beyond its time."

— Prema Vishwanathan
in the *Free Press Journal*

"Vimal's well researched work comes at a time when there's a great deal of public attention focused on the question of portrayal of women in the media. (This book) inquires into how the media subverts the women's question... Every woman activist and journalist interested in the way media reflects/distorts reality should get a copy of this book."

— *Eve's Weekly*

Rs. 65/-